

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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APRIL



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES

FEATURE NOVEL

• THERE'S HELL IN JOHNSON COUNTY!

by CHARLES W.
TYLER

NOVELETTES

• A RIVER MAN GOES TO WAR

by
FRANK BONHAM

• THE GHOST OF SATAN'S RANCHO

by M. HOWARD
LANE

- ROAN
- JOHNSTON
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
APRIL 10TH

VOLUME XVIII

APRIL, 1942

NUMBER 1

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Western Feature

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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A true experience of special policeman FRANK HAHNEL, New York, N. Y.



"IT WAS STILL DARK...and bitter cold on the waterfront...when I finished my night patrol," writes Mr. Hahnel. "I had paused for a moment to say hello to a couple of friends when above the dismal sounds of the river came a piercing shriek and a heavy splash. Then there was silence.

"WE RUSHED FOR THE WHARF. I yanked out my flashlight and turned it on the water. There in the icy river 14 feet below we saw a man struggling feebly...clawing at the ice-sheathed pilings as the out-racing tide sucked him away from the pier.



"QUICKLY I DARTED my light about and located a length of line on a nearby barge...and a life preserver on an adjoining pier. In an instant the preserver splashed in the water beside the drowning man. Dazed from shock and cold, half clinging to the preserver and half lassoed by the line, he was dragged to safety. Thanks to my 'Eveready' flashlight and its dependable fresh DATED batteries the river was cheated of its victim. (Signed) Frank J. Hahnel"

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THE FIGHTING HEART

TODAY we have the biggest fight in history on our hands. By far the biggest and the most vital. On its outcome depends the future not only of America, the British Empire and their allies, but of the entire world. No one who reads the papers and listens to the radio can doubt the gravity of this war.

Nor can anyone, knowing our heroic record of the past, and watching the effects of our awakening might, seriously doubt what the outcome will be. We are hitting our stride. It won't be long before our production of planes and guns and tanks will far outstrip that of our combined enemies. That's the long-term picture, and it means certain and complete victory.

Until the superior equipment and superior forces of trained man-power get into the field, we are playing our cards the way they fall. We are standing our ground, with the weapons and men we have. And we are hitting back. The fighting heart of Americans is something the Japs apparently didn't count on. They are finding out about it—in the jungles of our Pacific island outposts. And, we can safely predict, they'll find out a lot more, to their everlasting regret, before we are through with them.

They should have read a little more American history before pitching in. They should have read a few Westerns. Maybe they would have learned that Americans don't count the odds when they get good and mad. And they might have found out that the fighting heart is nine-tenths of the battle—as proved by three centuries of American frontiersmen.

There's a novelette by Art Lawson, "Kansas Law for Texas Drovers," to appear in next month's 10 STORY WESTERN, which we'd like to recommend for the attention of the Japs or anyone else who doesn't understand about the American way of fighting.

The grangers of Crazy Creek, in cahoots with the crooked bosses of a Kansas rail-head town, were trying to pull a slick fraud against Bill Hawkins, Texas drover. They outnumbered Bill's crew twenty to one, and Bill knew that the lives of many of his men might be lost, if it came to an out-and-out fight. All Bill wanted was to get his herd of Texas longhorns to the shipping pens at the Longhorn City stockyards. So he coughed up the cold, hard dollars that the grangers demanded before

they would agree to letting his herd cross their fields. He was still mad about that.

His herd was held south of the creek. The grangers were lining the north bank, armed with rifles and shotguns. But it was understood that they would just make a pretense of fighting, now that Bill had paid over the money they demanded. Here is a page from Art's story:

Bill rode hard to drive down his misgivings. He told the boys that he would give the signal when they were to move: three bunched shots at five o'clock. That was the hour he and the town-bosses' messenger had agreed on. He skirted the creek a couple of times to check up on the grangers' movements. Nothing new occurred over there. At noon time some men rode out from the nearer farms to relieve those on duty. The longer he watched them, the madder Bill got.

He was so bitterly angry, when he got back to his chuck wagon and found that Big Jim Kouse, Longhorn City's sheriff, had come calling, he almost knocked the man down.

"Beat it, Sheriff," he snapped. "Get the hell out of here. This ain't your county."

The sheriff grinned. "I been thinking about your troubles, Bill. It's the law that keeps you out, but I got to thinking the law was too hard. Course I can't change it."

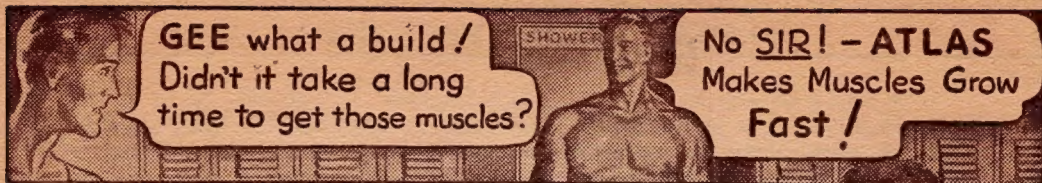
"Course not," Bill said sardonically.

The sheriff ignored his tone. "I heard a rumor of trouble up to the north end of the county," he told Bill. "I better be going now. It's a long way from here. Maybe I should stick around, but everything looks peaceful around the creek."

Bill could not miss the hint. The sheriff might just as well have said that he had received his cut in Bill's bribe, and was consequently removing himself so that he would not see Bill break the law. It hit Bill square in the middle of his sorest spot, and he could not control his temper any longer.

He kneed his horse up to the lawman.

(Concluded on page 8)



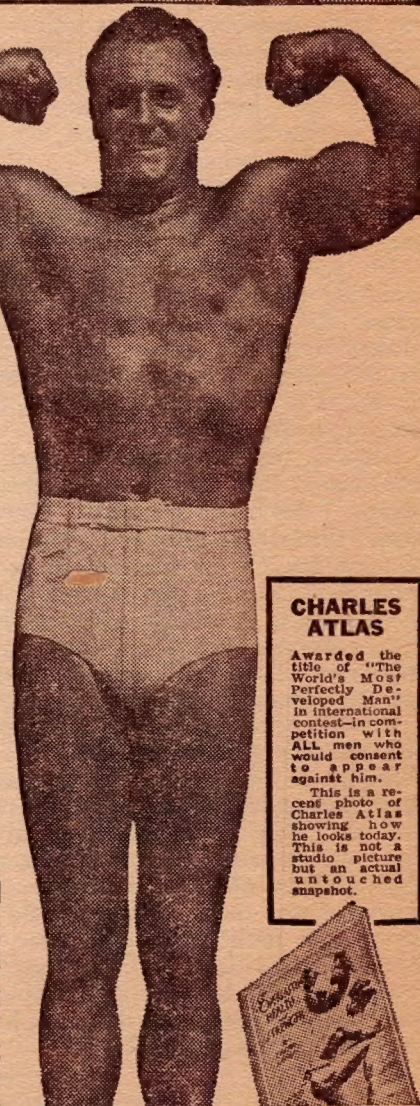
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(Continued from page 6)

Then he grabbed Big Jim by the collar and rolled his spurs along his mount's ribs. Both horses jumped ahead in terror, Bill's dragging the other with it. Bill twisted on the throat of Big Jim's shirt until the fat sheriff's face turned purple, and he kept jogging his spurs, kicking both mounts toward the creek while he held Big Jim helpless.

When he reached the bank, Bill said softly, "Thanks for the hint, lawman. I'll take it."

He yanked hard, pulling the sheriff from the saddle to tumble him into the water. He waited while Big Jim's mount plowed across the stream, kicking spray ten feet above the banks. Then he reared his horse, drew his pistol and shot three times into the sky.

Seconds passed. From far down the line came the answers. Six-shooters barked. Slickers snapped. Cowboys loosed the terrible rebel yell. The sheriff plunged up the far bank of the creek, scrambling like a big pig. A moment later the sod began to rumble with the pound of four thousand hoofs—and the bellow of frightened, stampeded longhorns lifted its horrible thunder to the afternoon sky.

Bill watched them rush by. In the creek and out, they went, tearing up brush and dragging it with them. They lowered their heads, poked their noses to the north and ran. They ran blindly, instinctively, like four thousand locomotives on a rampage with no one at the throttle. You could not stop them. Nothing could halt them now until their orneriness was worked out of them and they had quit from sheer exhaustion. That would be some ten miles away, Bill reckoned, in the stockyards of Longhorn City.

Bill laughed. The sheriff, fat as an old cow, was trying to beat the stampede. Far across the prairie he waddled, making remarkable time, not even bothering to glance back at the horror that pursued him. But, closer to the creek, not running at all, were the grangers. They were standing their ground, and Bill thought they were overdoing their mock battle. He saw a shot steer plow over onto its snout, dig its horns into the sod and roll over twice before coming to a soggy halt. A second steer ran out of the bunch with which he had been traveling. He stopped, all alone in a clear space, dazed, and collapsed slowly like a leaking balloon.

Downcreek, one of Bill's cowboys flew from the saddle, while his horse tumbled dead under him. The puncher whirled over and over, to strike the creek with a great splash. Bill was paralyzed with dread until the cowboy's head reappeared above the surface and the man's ringing curses reached him. Then he knew something had gone wrong.

Bill knew with dread certainty that he had been double-crossed.

And then the fighting really began. He had been promised safe passage. He had paid for it. And when the town crooks and their cohorts, the grangers, went back on their bargain, it was time to fight—and fight hard—no matter what the odds.

As this is being written, it doesn't look as if our boys in the Pacific are going to give the Japs much leisure for reading. But if Mr. Moto has the time, we suggest that he start perusing stories, like this one of Art Lawson's, that tell what we Americans can do when we really get mad.

THE EDITOR.





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THERE'S HELL *in* JOHNSON COUNTY!

An epic of feudists' range

By CHARLES W. TYLER



The cowboy slowly brought up his Winchester. The riders



Satan's own syndicate of bushwhacking, backstabbing, gun-heeled madmen ordered roaring sixes and flaming torches to turn Wyoming's sunny Johnson County into a burying ground for nesters. And all that stood in the way of their murder jackpot was an outlaw-branded fighting youngster—and a rangeland waif's blue-eyed, blonde-haired doll!

CHAPTER ONE

Double-Cross

BILL RIDEOUT had sensed something wrong before that first shot had torn open the noonday quiet of Redstone. He'd been whistling softly through his teeth when he had come out of the bank,

were moving at a walk, sharp silhouettes against the silver sky.

jingling the gold pieces in the pockets of his patched and faded levis and thinking about the things he was going to buy over at Marlow's store.

There'd be shoes and a warm coat for Babe, and that doll he'd promised; something for Nan, and that pair of fancy-stitched boots he'd been wanting.

He saw Storm Lacey then, talking to Duke Beale and Mitch Jarvis. The whistling stopped, and Bill Rideout found himself tensing. He had always felt that Lacey had been responsible for the death of his father, bushwhacked in the Hole-in-the-Wall.

Storm Lacey was a gnarled oak of a man, with bushy brows and eyes like cold steel. He was blunt, outspoken and with no more feeling, men said, than a granite slab.

Duke Beale, manager for a big English cattle outfit, was a slit-eyed, hawk-beaked man of forty-odd, with a tight, cruel mouth and a rattler's disposition. A stiff-brimmed nutria Stetson and his Denver clothes gave Jarvis an air of smoothness that seemed to set him a little apart.

"Howdy, Lacey," Bill Rideout said, politely, while his blood ran hot with that old, smouldering hatred. He stood there a moment, fumbling for his tobacco sack and papers.

"How do, Rideout," Storm Lacey rumbled. His bleak eyes ran boldly, challengingly over the slim-hipped cowboy—and promptly dismissed him.

Beale flicked the puncher with a curiously sly look that seemed to carry a subtle threat; then touched Bill Rideout's flea-bitten gray, there beyond the hitch-rail, lingering for an instant on the brand.

Mitch Jarvis apparently caught something in Beale's eye, for he turned to give the other a slow stare; then he took out his watch, looked at it and glanced down the street, as though expecting someone.

Bill Rideout shaped up his smoke, his fingers not too steady. He knew the whole town was watching, waiting for that explosion that was no farther away than a man's holster. . . .

Johnson County, Wyoming, was a powder keg. Violent enmity was there, hot and savage. Guns had spilled angry lead; men had died, and the ruthless warfare was no nearer being settled now than it

had been at the start of the Cattlemen's War.

The big outfits, the cattle barons, were lined up against the little spreads and the nesters. Small owners and settlers claimed they were being squeezed out. The others countered with the charge that their cattle were being rustled.

The big owners had brought in hired killers; men had been shot down ruthlessly, the guilty along with the innocent. A sod-buster's shack had gone up in flames; families were threatened; cowmen were attacked in their homes and punchers picked off on the range.

Lacey, of the Powder Land and Cattle Company, Beale, of the Block R, and Jarvis had been the prime movers back of the invading gun-toughs.

Some day, Bill Rideout told himself, there was going to be a shoot-out, right here in town. Things couldn't go on as they were. It would mean a bullet or a rope for those who lost, but that was better than being bushwhacked and not having a chance to fight back.

He lighted his cigarette, flipped away his match; then he heeled around and stalked stiffly across the street toward Marlow's store.

"I want the biggest doll yuh got," he told the clerk. "It's got to have yellow hair an' blue eyes."

Twenty minutes later, Bill Rideout had completed his purchases and was moving back toward the bank and his horse, his arms full of bundles.

Six riders turned in past the blacksmith shop and came on toward the center of town. The hoofs of the horses made small dents in a silence disturbed only by the husk-dry chatter of hot-birds and the sing-song ditty of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil.

The riders were heavily armed and apparently strangers. Bill noticed how their heads kept turning this way and that, eyes alive, wary. He instantly knew a vague uneasiness.

They reined up at the hitch-rail in front of the bank, their hat brims pulled low to shade faces masked by beards. Their movements were unhurried and seemed to follow a carefully rehearsed pattern. No word was spoken.

They stepped down and four walked

toward the bank door. Two remained with the horses. Bill Rideout frowned, while his eye searched out the brands of their mounts. Suddenly nerves centering at the pit of his stomach bunched into a tight knot.

Something was wrong, dead wrong.



ONE HORSE was a roan gelding, with a Bar O on its shoulder. It was Ed Parmlee's iron—and there wasn't a roan in the Bar O's cavvy. Bill Rideout knew, because the Bar O was just about the same as home. Ed Parmlee had been like a father to him, and there was Babe and Nan. . .

He moved along the sidewalk, looking at the other brands; his breath sucked in through his teeth at the discovery he made.

He knew every one of those irons: the Longhorn, the Crazy E, the Cinch Buckle. Good God, he'd been riding for the Cinch Buckle! It had been Jud McQueen's check he'd just cashed. The flea-bitten gray beyond the hitch-rail, the horse he'd ridden in, carried a Cinch Buckle brand.

None of these men worked for McQueen, or any of the other outfits, so far as he knew. Either the horses had been stolen or it was a plant. A double-cross.

The thing scared him. He didn't know what was in the wind, but whatever it was it meant trouble. He thought of Ed Parmlee, work-worn, worried by the constant threat of the cattle barons and their hired gun-slingers. He thought of Nan, Ed's girl, of Babe—the other struggling little outfits, harrassed and shot at, as they fought for their very lives.

Bill Rideout shifted the bundles and moved around the end of the hitch-rail. At that instant one of the men swung around in front of the horses and a stone-cold pair of eyes leveled on him over the muzzle of a six-shooter.

"Stay right where you are, cowboy!" the man said. "Just keep hangin' onto them parcels an' don't start actin' up none."

It was then that a gun-blast ripped out from somewhere inside of the bank.

Charley Fair, a leading citizen in Red-

stone, had been in the bank. Rideout saw him stagger toward the door, try to save himself from falling by clutching at the jamb and then slide slowly down in a crumpled heap.

The smithy's hammer stopped its pounding. A stunned silence clamped down. Men who had been hunkered in front of Marlow's jerked to their feet. Faces appeared at windows and in doorways. Then there were yells, running figures, bootheels popping on plank walks; strident voices.

"It's a holdup!"

"They're robbin' the bank!"

Marshal Tom Overstreet lumbered out of the feed yard, his square-built bulk keyed to an awkward run. Duke Beale was in front of the barber shop, next door to Marlow's. He seemed cool and self-possessed. He spoke to Overstreet, and his words flowed across to Bill Rideout.

"It's some of that Hole-in-the-Wall bunch. Better watch yourself. Young Rideout an' a couple more are out there with the horses."

Overstreet's flushed face swung that way, but he couldn't see that Bill Rideout was still clutching those precious packages, or that he was covered by a gun in the hand of one of the outlaws. He could make out only the heads across the backs of the horses.

The marshal hesitated, his hand hovering close to gun-butt; then turned toward Marlow's, breathless commands jerking out. "Get those rifles out of the gun case in there," he ordered. "Pour it into them. . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet-Stung Outcast

BILL RIDEOUT was turning twenty-one, a lean youth with rusty freckles splotching his leathery countenance. His eyes were as blue as a sunny Wyoming sky. Trouble, however, had long since cast its shadow there.

Never in his memory had there been a time when life had been safe and free. He remembered the hardships and terrors of that wagon-train on the Oregon Trail when he was a kid, and the homestead on the Powder, threatened always by the

marauding Sioux and renegade bands.

Later came the Cattlemen's War, and nights criss-crossed by rifle flashes; friends and neighbors bludgeoned down by lead as white men turned their guns against one another.

His mother, a frail woman at best, had faded and died from the strain and worry of it all. Then his father had been murdered, and there had been only Babe and himself.

Vivid scars, they were—healed-over but never-to-be-forgotten welts on his memory. Seemed like a kid never knew normal boyhood. He was a man as soon as he could lift a rifle and pull a trigger.

That was the story of the Powder—an endless, grim battle to survive . . .

Until now the little outfits and the homesteaders had had a lot of friends and sympathizers. Folks wanted to be fair-minded, for there were always two sides to a story, but this was going to swing the tide to the side of the big owners.

This bold daylight robbery, those tell-tale horse brands, the shooting of Charley Fair, a fine, well-liked man—all were going to combine to set off an explosion. Come nightfall Hole-in-the-Wall would be crawling with gun-riders.

Imported Texas gun-hawks and hard-bitten ex-peace officers; men from Storm Tracey's Rocking T, Duke Beale's Block R, Mitch Jarvis' Stirrup—they'd all be out there hunting Ed Parmlee, Jud McQueen and the others.

Bill Rideout's brain began to click. He'd have to warn them, or they'd never have a chance. The way he figured it, Tracey and Beale had framed this thing; they meant to job the little outfits.

He set himself, nerves taut, his mouth a white scar across his face. The next instant he had pitched the bundles he held at the head of the nearest of the outlaws' horses.

The animal snorted, plunged away, careening against the man with the six-shooter.

The second outlaw had slid a carbine across the saddle and was watching the street. He whipped around now, cursing. The man with the .45 stumbled, dodged past the end of the hitch-rail. Still off balance, he fired, but the bullet was wide.

The spooked horses milling there gave

Bill momentary protection. He snatched at the trailing reins of the gray, flipped them up and piled into the saddle. He drove his spurs against the animal's flanks even before he caught the stirrups.

Dust was roiled up in a furious cloud. Shots ripped out. Somewhere glass crashed. There were wild shouts.

Duke Beale, there by the barber shop, had pulled a six-shooter from beneath his coat. Bill Rideout saw it jerking in his hand. Lead snarled past him. Then something snatched hard at his vest and he felt a stab of pain along his ribs.

Each instant he expected his horse to go down under him. It seemed they couldn't miss so big a target, but guns were lashing out from in front of the bank now and men were hunting cover.

When he reached the end of the street, Rideout looked back. From what he could make out, the townsmen hadn't had a chance to put up much of a fight. Already the outlaws were in the saddle and moving into the passageway alongside the bank. The next time he saw them they were circling past scattered houses on the outskirts.

Rideout became aware of knifing pain. His shirt was soggy against his side. When he took a deep breath it hurt. "Busted ribs," he muttered through his teeth. A few inches more and he would have been fixed for keeps. He cursed Duke Beale to hell and gone.

The miles flowed under the pelting hoofs of the gray and at last he pulled up on a ridge to let the spent animal blow. He pulled his shirt open and examined the bloody crease along his ribs. He was feverish and a little sick.

That he had been there in front of the bank was, of course, merely a coincidence, a rotten piece of luck, any way you looked at it. Still it had worked out all right, for it was going to give Ed Parmlee and the rest a chance to shape up some sort of a defense.

Across the valley behind him, he made out a dust pennon. He didn't think pursuit could have been organized so quickly. He'd been hitting a fast gait. He reasoned that it must be the outlaws, heading for Hole-in-the-Wall.

"Let's go, hoss." He winced as the gray swung into a lope; then grinned

wryly. He'd been hurt worse in days gone by.

Funny how a feller's mind ran. He thought of Babe's doll, probably trampled and broken back there in the dust. It sure had been pretty. He could see the disappointment in Babe's eyes when he showed up at the Bar O without it.

"Gee," he muttered, "I'd rather take a lickin'."



HOLE-IN-THE-WALL was not, as the name seemed to imply, a tightly compact retreat buried in deep-slashed canyons, but a country of breadth and rolling hills—a ranch country.

In this fringe of the Big Horns, Ed Parmlee had his home. Other cowmen had places there, including a number of big outfits. There was plenty of grass and water. It was a fine place to live—the best there was, Bill Rideout reckoned.

He had planned to own a ranch one day in this Hole-in-the-Wall country, and make a home for Nan Parmlee and Babe.

He'd built a lot of air castles around those two. Seemed like day-dreams was all they were ever goin' to be, though. Nan was nineteen, and as handy around a cow outfit as a puncher; pretty, too.

Babe was a tiny mite, for all of her six years, and sorta like a doll herself. She had flaxen curls and big blue eyes that looked on the world with unceasing wonder, apparently finding it a place of manifold mysteries and endless joy.

Trouble, it seemed, never touched her, and yet at two years of age she had been cast adrift in the lap of tragedy. Babe's mother and father had been nesters up around Sheridan, but had made the mistake of building their cabin on too low ground. One night a flash flood had swept it away.

Bill Rideout and his father, returning home after a cattle drive to the railroad, had found Babe, a bedraggled kid, cast up on higher ground by a freakish whim of the mad waters, whimpering there and more dead than alive. The nearest neighbor was miles away, and there Bill and his father had only learned that the young settlers had been named Jameson.

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"We'll take her, of course," the granger's wife had said, "though we're mighty poor."

Jim Rideout had said, "She belongs to Bill and me. We ain't got any women folks at our place any more, an' we're needin' somebody to love, now that my wife's gone. You care for the little one until we come back for her."

They had called her Babe because that seemed to fit her better than any name they could think of. Babe had proved to be a joy and a treasure, and somehow helped to fill the aching vacancy of the ranchhouse.

Jim Rideout had hired the oldest daughter of a sod-buster neighbor, who lived near them, to care for Babe days, and soon she was as much a part of their life as though she had been their own flesh and blood.

Following the death of his father the year before, Bill had taken Babe to Ed Parmlee's. Things had been tough. The bank at Redstone had foreclosed the mortgage it held, and he'd had to hunt jobs where he could find them.

Babe was watching the road. It seemed, almost, that her eyes had never left it since Bill Rideout had waved goodbye, hours before.

He had stopped in on the way from the Cinch Buckle, both to see Nan and to get one of Babe's "big hugs" and a kiss.

"I'm a-goin' to fetch you the biggest an' the prettiest doll they got in Redstone," Bill had promised Babe. "It's goin' to have golden hair an' blue eyes, just like yours."

The biggest and prettiest doll in town was a smashed and battered thing there at the edge of the sidewalk in front of the bank, forlorn and forgotten. Well, not quite forgotten. Storm Tracey had picked it up, when things had quieted a little, and curiously pulled loose the torn paper wrapping.

He had lifted off the broken cover of the box, scowling, perplexed at what he saw. Then the bleakness of his eyes thawed a little and memories came crowding in. . . .

Bill Rideout's heart was heavy. The hurt there, when he heard Babe's shrill, welcoming cry, was worse than the tearing ache of his smashed ribs.

Nan, coming up from the corral, stopped to stare at the lathered, hard-ridden gray. Then, too, there was the droop to Bill Rideout's shoulders, his drawn features.

"I don't see any bundle," Babe said. Her lips quivered a little. She loved her old rag doll, but the thought of a brand new store doll was—well, perhaps, a little bit of the feeling of a mother when a new baby is coming.

"It—it's probably in his saddlebag," Nan said, but somehow she knew it wasn't.

Bill reined up, looked down at Babe, shook his head. "I'm awful sorry," he told her. "But—somethin' happened. Next time I'll get it sure."

Two big tears glistened there, but Babe resolutely dabbed at them with tight-clenched fists. "I guess I'd love my old doll best anyhow," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

Outlaw Trail

BILL RIDEOUT eased out of the saddle. He winced, bit his lip and stood there, one hand hanging to the stirrup leather.

"Bill, what's the matter?" Nan cried.

"Big trouble. Where's Ed?"

"Hunting stock down in the Middle Fork."

"Gear a horse an' see if yuh can find him. I got to go on to the Cinch Buckle an' warn Jud; then get word to the Longhorn an' the Crazy E."

Nan took a quick step forward and caught his arm. "What happened?" she said quickly. "Have you killed somebody?"

"It's worse than that." Briefly he told what had occurred in Redstone.

Mrs. Parmlee came from the house. "Bill Rideout, you're white as a sheet. What have you been up to?"

"They shot you!" Nan exclaimed.

"Don't amount to nothin'," Bill said. "I got to get on soon's I can throw this hull on a fresh horse."

"You get on into the kitchen," Mrs. Parmlee commanded. Her sharp eyes found the bullet hole and the blood-stained

garments. "Go on, an' get off that shirt." She knew that storm clouds were making. They'd never been far away, these hard years in Wyoming.

Another woman might have cried, "What's the use?" and urged her husband to quit a country so torn by hatreds and strife, but not Abigail Parmlee, for she was the type of frontier wife who, once she had put her roots down, was there to stay.

They dressed Bill's wound and bound his slim, pale torso in tight-drawn bandages. All of the time he was going over again the scene in town.

"Duke Beale," Bill groaned, "was yellin' that it was Hole-in-the-Wall riders, an' said I was with 'em. There must been plenty folks recognized them brands on the horses. They'll shove fifty men in here come night."

"Ed will make them see reason," Mrs. Parmlee said calmly. "He can account for his riders. Why, there's only old Buffalo an' Pete Crye an' Johnny Glass."

"Storm Tracey's back of it!" Nan snapped. "I hate him!"

"Storm's had his share of trouble," Mrs. Parmlee said. "I guess that's what soured the man."

"He don't know what trouble is," Bill Rideout said bitterly. "He never had his ranch shot up, or had to dodge bushwhack lead like the rest of us."

"I expect he figgers what he has been through is worse," Mrs. Parmlee said. "He lost his wife when he first came into this country. That was before he bought the ranch that is his headquarters now, over here on the Powder. He had a daughter who was the livin' image of her, the story goes but she married against his wishes an' they quarreled. The girl went away an' he never saw her again."

A little later, Bill Rideout, with the help of Mrs. Parmlee and Nan, geared a fresh horse. The girl saddled a pony and rode with him as far as the fork.

Thunderheads were winnowing up behind the rims of the Big Horns. Bill eyed them scowlingly. "A squall will wash out the tracks of that outlaw bunch," he said. Then: "Wish I knew where they was headin'."

Nan watched him, her eyes troubled. Ever since his father had been killed, the

talk had been how easy it would be for the kid to turn gun-tough. Bitterness had ridden him; he had turned moody.

More, he had now and then boasted of his friendship for Nate Champion and Nick Ray. Champion and Ray were hard cases, and the big outfits had already made an attempt to wipe them out. Both Parmlee and McQueen had warned the young puncher to stay clear of this pair.

"They ain't no worse than the hired killers workin' for the big outfits," Bill had retorted.

The girl set her horse close and put her hand on Bill Rideout's arm. "Don't do anything foolish," she said.

"They're tellin' that I'm an outlaw!" he clipped. "No matter what I do, things can't be no worse."

Nan Parmlee leaned toward him. "Kiss me," she said gently.

Bill's eyes softened, and he pulled her to him. A moment later he rode away. . . .

At the Cinch Buckle, Jud McQueen listened gravely to Bill Rideout's story of the holdup and the killing of Charley Fair. He was a man of thirty-odd, tall, lanky, sleepy-eyed. Trouble had furrowed his face and aged him beyond his years.

"You sure about them horse brands, Bill?" he asked.

Rideout nodded. "I couldn't miss."

"Duke Beale is a schemer," McQueen said slowly. "He's had his eye on some of these ranches along the river. I wouldn't put nothin' beyond him. Storm Tracey is an owly old cuss, but I never figgered him low-down enough to try an' frame us that-away."

"This outlaw bunch was behind me when I crossed the rims north of Medicine Wheel Valley," Bill said. "That looks like they was headin' for the Hole-in-the-Wall, but I never seen any of 'em before."

"Likely they're just gun-riders the Block R an' some of the big outfits imported," McQueen said. "The hell of it is these same hombres will turn around now an' make a great show of ridin' with the law, an' we'll have to defend ourselves against them."

"There's one way to stop it," Bill Rideout said.

"How, Bill?"

"Find out where they went an' slap some lead at 'em."

"Yes, an' while we was huntin' 'em some of that crowd would burn us out. We're just hangin' on in this country now by the grace o' God." Jud McQueen gave his shoulders a tired shrug. "Beale an' his bunch have got the Association with 'em, along with the sheriff an' the courts."

"Look, Jud," Bill Rideout said. "I'm quittin'. I ain't ridin' for you now; I got some other business."

McQueen shrugged. "Suit yourself, kid." Suddenly he looked sharply at the other. "Hey, what are you goin' to do?"

Bill Rideout pulled himself into the saddle. "That's my business," he said harshly. "'By, Jud!" Then he rode away.



THUNDER exploded in the Big Horns like a gun battle of giants. Lightning laced the storm clouds. Wind howled across the foothills and big raindrops slanted down.

Pain-racked, Bill Rideout had ridden hard to beat the storm. A quarter of an hour ago he had come again to the ruts of the wagon trail that threaded into Hole-in-the-Wall from town.

His eyes now were on the tracks of the six horsemen who had come out of Redstone behind him. The sign was clear and he followed it at a lope. Trailers called it "sliding the groove" when tracks were so sharply defined that a man could run them from the back of a galloping horse.

Four miles south of the Bar O these tracks bore away from the road, slanting over a bench in a short-cut that came out on the pair of ruts that led in to the Block R, the big English outfit managed by Duke Beale.

Bill Rideout was almost within sight of the ranch when the rain struck with a whispering rush. He pulled up and watched the hoof-marks fade under the onslaught of the squall, but he had seen enough; he knew now where that bunch had come from, the same place a lot of other things had been planned, he guessed.

His eyes smouldered with a sullen fire that no storm could quench, while the savagery that built within was as bleak and purposeful as a northern blizzard.

There wasn't the shadow of a doubt but that the raiders who had made their play there in Redstone had headed straight for the Block R.

Bill Rideout sought shelter from the rain under the overhang of a ledge a little off the road. His thoughts ran as hot and furious as the lightning flashes. Beale had tried to kill him, knowing the sham of that attack on the bank for what it was.

Duke Beale, the plotter; Mitch Jarvis, fox-cunning, greedy for wealth and power in Johnson County, and old Storm Tracey, soured by some freakish whim of the Fates—those three were bent on throwing living sacrifices on the altars of their ruthless and destroying gods.

What chance did the little outfits have? What chance had his father, a quiet-spoken, hard-working man, had? Or Orley Jones? Or Tom Waggoner?

Jones, like his dad, had been bushwhacked. Waggoner had been dragged from his home, taken from his wife and his kids, and hanged like a common horse thief. The law had made a few futile gestures, but nothing had been done to avenge the unjust killings.

The storm finally passed. The sun came out, briefly warming the land; then slipped away behind the mountains. Three horsemen appeared, riding slowly along the road from town. Rideout slipped his carbine from its scabbard and crouched behind the brush that fringed the ledge.

The riders dipped from view for a little while; then reappeared as they topped a rise not a hundred yards away. Rideout recognized them then. They were Duke Beale, Mitch Jarvis and Storm Tracey.

Bill Rideout turned rigid. They were heading for the Block R for a final conference before they turned their gunners loose. They'd strike ahead of the sheriff, who had to come all of the way from Buffalo town.

Once Nate Champion had said, "Kid, the oldest law I know is an eye for an eye. And if yuh bushwhack a man shoot quick—before your conscience spoils your aim."

An eye for an eye. That was it! A skulker's bullet from ambush had killed his dad.

The cowboy slowly brought up his Winchester. The riders were moving at a

walk, sharp silhouettes against the silver sky. His mind was razor-sharp. He'd knock Beale out of the saddle first; he owed the Block R man a bullet. After that he'd shoot the horses under the other two; then finish them on the ground.

Bill Rideout's finger tightened against the trigger. Duke Beale, stiffly erect in the saddle, rode with the front sight. . . . Of course they'd get him in the end—the cattle barons' killers—just like they'd get Ed Parmlee and Jud McQueen and the others.

He lowered the rifle, trying to loosen up and shake off the tenseness that corded his muscles. The slow *clip-clop* of those hoofs hammered at his brain. He lined the Winchester quickly, resolutely. Faces were there, hard in front of the .30-30's sights. Not the faces of Beale and Tracey and Jarvis, but of Mrs. Parmlee and Nan and Babe.

Frightened faces, veiled by thin wisps of gunsmoke. Big tears, like small pearls, were rolling down Babe's cheeks. Babe, the rangeland waif he and his dad had rescued from that flooded valley. He could almost hear Babe's shrill, piping voice; feel her arms around his neck.

The biggest and prettiest doll in town, smashed there under those trampling hoofs. He'd promised her another one—sure.

The muzzle of the rifle wavered, dropped. Hell, a feller couldn't trust himself to drive hot lead home when his eyes was all misted up like this. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Challenge

MOONLIGHT silvered the rolling hills. Somewhere a lone coyote yapped monotonously. The air was clean and cool; the smell of the land was fresh and sweet after the rain.

A lone rider moved up the road, drawing rein beneath the high-posted ranch gate that carried a Block R on its big-timbered crosspiece.

For a long time Bill Rideout sat there, eyes on the sprawling ranch buildings. The yellow pattern of lighted windows was warm, inviting. Voices flowed out from the bunkhouse when someone opened the

door for a moment. An aura of complete and utter peace had settled over the great Block R ranch.

After a time, he went on toward the horse corral. It was almost as light as day, and he could make out the markings of the animals within. His eyes found the big-bodied roan; he was sure it was the horse he'd seen there in front of the bank.

And there was that blaze-faced grulla with the three white stockings. It was the outlaw's mount that had been next to him at the hitch-rail; the animal he'd spooked.

Rideout stepped out of the saddle and stood there for a moment, looking around. He went toward the great, rambling ranch-house then, his heart slugging at his aching ribs. He wondered if a man ever got over being scared to face things.

His fingers touched the grips of his six-shooter. He loosened the safety strap.

Yellow mats were spread beneath the windows of the big room at the front. Voices murmured; he had a brief glimpse of pale faces, blue streamers of tobacco smoke. He pulled the Colt, eared the hammer back under a bony thumb; then felt for the iron latch with his left hand.

The heavy door swung inward and Bill Rideout moved across the threshold—fast. He closed the door, set his back against it.

He heard a strained voice saying, "I'll kill the first man that tries to pull a gun!" His voice it was, harsh and unnatural. Funny how things were workin'—just like he'd planned, squattin' out there under the ledge, cold and wet and sore, his belly gaunt as a hungry coyote's.

Ed Parmlee had always said you could figger a man out mostly, but a kid was as unexpected as Monday's company.

Duke Beale ripped out an oath, strained forward in his chair, his face livid, his eyes hot as hell's fire. Mitch Jarvis blinked, whistled softly.

Bill Rideout's glance touched the others. He knew them all, and hated them.

There was big Til Cass, Block R foreman, his driving eyes hot and savage, and Les Parrot, from the Stirrup, the alarm on his face changing to a sneering grimace, and Fred Cuning, with his bullet-shaped head and receding chin, toying with the whiskey bottle on the table, while his heavy-lidded stare poured out venom.

Old Storm Tracey was slouched in a chair beside the big oak table, the light from the lamp shining on his craggy face. His lips pinched down a little, while a strange something flickered beneath his tufted brows. He was the first to speak.

"Howdy, Rideout," he said gruffly. "Thought you wouldn't be far away, after what happened in town."

Bill Rideout looked at him, puzzled. Old Storm was wise as a tree full of owls, and honest, Ed Parmlee said—honest as he was ruthless when he felt his rights were being trampled. He had helped organize the cattle business in the country and arrange round-up dates; he had been one of that group who formed the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association.

"I wa'n't far away when you crossed the bench out here," Rideout said. "I had a chance to square a lot of things, includin' the murder of my dad. I dunno why I didn't—'cause I was a chicken-hearted fool, I guess."

Duke Beale said, "How many you got with you?"

Bill Rideout's furious eyes lashed at him. "There ain't nobody with me." They figgered he'd been scairt to come here alone.

"You're a liar!" Beale snarled.

"I warned Ed Parmlee an' Jud McQueen that you was out to job 'em," Rideout went on. "Then I cut back an' picked up the tracks of the riders that came out of town behind me—that outlaw bunch. Only they wasn't bandits; they was hired to do that, just like gun-toughs have been hired to make war on the little outfits."

Beale and Jarvis exchanged glances. The latter smiled thinly as he stole a quick look at Storm Tracey. The other was staring at Bill Rideout.

"You trailed that gang, eh?" Tracey rumbled. "Where did they go?"

"They came here!" Rideout swallowed, gave his feverish lips a swipe with his tongue. "That roan with the fake Bar O brand is out in the horse corral, right now. Ed Parmlee ain't got a cayuse like that in his cavy."

"Go on," Beale said thickly, the fingers of his right hand spreading, "spill your guts, because you won't get out of here alive."

BILL RIDEOUT'S hot palm tightened about the walnut grip of his six-shooter. The time was getting close. Trying to keep his voice steady, he said, "The blaze-face grulla with the three white stockin's is out here too, along with the rest of 'em, I reckon. If the horses are here so are the fellers that rode 'em."

Til Cass shrugged. "You're too big for your boots, kid," he rasped. "But there's a way to take care of that." His hand started to crawl toward the gun-butt at his right hip, while he stabbed a side glance at Les Parrot.

Cass, Bill Rideout knew, was a bully and a killer. Parrot was fast with a gun and treacherous. They were the ones to watch.

Suddenly Storm Tracey came out of his chair. "Wait a minute!" he roared. "Let's get this straight." He looked like a gnarled old monarch at timber line.

"Take it easy, Storm," Mitch Jarvis purred. "The kid is just runnin' off at the mouth."

"He was one of them," Beale put in. "You saw him there in front of the bank. He shot Fair when he came out of the door."

"That's a lie!" Rideout gritted. "Anyhow, my hands was full of bundles."

Tracey put his two hands on the table and leaned forward. "The boy's right," he said slowly. "I saw him when he came from Marlow's, and I picked those bundles up later." His eyes were on Rideout now. His voice softened. "There were a kid's shoes and coat—and a busted doll. . . ."

Fred Cunning grabbed the whiskey bottle, lurched half erect and hurled it at Bill Rideout.

The cowboy had been watching Cass and Parrot. He caught the movement from the tail of his eye, heard the scrape of the chair and jerked to one side as the bottle shattered against the door.

Til Cass wrenched his Colt clear. Les Parrot flashed his gun. The next instant the rafters rocked to the concussions of roaring six-shooters.

Cass and Parrot missed; Rideout had been moving. Bill fired the fraction of an instant later; fired twice—fast. His first shot struck Til Cass dead center and folded him forward; the second clipped Par-

rot's vest; then smashed a hole in the plaster beyond.

Duke Beale and Mitch Jarvis, bewildered by the suddenness with which the thing had broken, grabbed tardily for their guns. However, before either could fire, they were caught in an upheaval from an unexpected quarter.

The big oak table was upended as though blasted by an exploding powder charge. It knocked over Fred Cuning and slammed into Les Parrot, batting him off his feet.

The massive Rochester lamp set sail straight at Duke Beale like a flaming meteor, together with all of the various objects that had rested on the table. The Block R man screeched an oath and threw himself out of the lamp's path, crashing over a chair and plummeting to the floor.

Jarvis sliced off his chair with a squeal of dismay, hitting Fred Cuning, who was on his hands and knees, mumbling oaths and pawing for his gun. No one was exactly sure what had happened, for all eyes had been on Rideout.

The fallen lamp ignited the spilled coal oil, fire ran along a rug with a greedy rush. Came gusty curses, grunts and the sounds of heaving bodies. Rideout turned, jerked up the iron latch and spun across the threshold. The image he carried from that scene of confusion was that of old Storm Tracey, standing there spraddle-legged, his rocky features alive with fury.

Figures were spilling from the open door of the bunkhouse. Yells ripped out. Bill Rideout started for the corral and his horse.

Suddenly the moonlight revealed a familiar bearded face blocking his retreat; he recognized the outlaw who had covered him, there beyond the hitch-rail in Redstone.

Coming from the ranchhouse, he had jammed his sixgun into its holster. He grabbed for it now desperately, as a black muzzle whipped up. At that instant fire streaked from the shadows of a nearby shed and the hard spat of a carbine topped the yammer of voices.

The bearded man spun half around and fell. Bill Rideout saw the riders then, while a familiar voice slapped at him. "Grab that bronc of yours, Bill, an' let's get out of here!" It was Ed Parmlee.

Rideout's joyous yell was lost in a sudden gun volley that turned back confused Block R punchers. Snarling lead smashed at the bunkhouse, raked the big house, shattered glass and struck with vindictive fury at everything that moved.

Beyond, flames started to run up a hay stack. The gear room lighted; yellow tongues began to lick out inside of a shed. The glow behind the windows of the big room at the front of the main ranchhouse was brightening.

A man lay kicking violently in the pale rectangle of light in front of the bunkhouse. Another was dragging his shattered body toward shelter. Now guns were answering from the Block R, but they were wild, hurried shots that did no damage.

Bill Rideout caught his horse and clawed his way into the saddle, his own wound forgotten. His eyes swept the scene and he knew a primitive exultance. He had witnessed gun-fights before, but the victims had been small outfits or terror-ridden nesters.

For the first time, the tables had been turned, and the Block R, one of the biggest outfits in the country, was getting its own baptism of hate. Retribution was sweet, but Bill Rideout knew that the satisfaction of it would be short-lived. Ed Parmlee and the rest would pay, in the days that were to come, with blood and heartache.

As he reined back past the horse corral, Jud McQueen came up beside him.

"Kid," the Cinch Buckle man growled, "you or no man is big enough to fight this alone. Next time stick with the crowd."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Warrant for Murder

BUFFALO, Pete Crye and Johnny Glass, of the Bar O, and Al Brush and Willie Lee, from the Cinch Buckle were with McQueen. So were Socks Sidell and Runty Kelso, from the Longhorn.

They were grim, silent, as they rode away across the rolling hills of Hole-in-the-Wall, while behind them a yellow blush flared against the sky. Now and then a man looked back.

A certain guilt rode Bill Rideout. Beale and the others knew he had been working for the Cinch Buckle, and that he was a close friend of Parmlee, Brush and Sidell. His appearance at the ranch was going to establish the identity of the riders who had attacked it.

Wiser heads, he reflected glumly, would have remembered a recent attempt by big outfits to kill Nate Champion and Nick Ray at the KC ranch. They had shrouded the raid in the utmost secrecy, thus passing suspicion to the rustlers and their allies. But there was nothing to be gained in belated regrets. What was done was water over the dam.

Ed Parmlee dropped back beside him. "Well, the fat's in the fire, kid." His voice held no reproach; it was merely tired.

"Reckon I played the fool, Ed," Rideout said. "If it hadn't been for me swarmin' in there, Beale an' them would probably figgered it was the rustlers." He added a little lamely, "I told 'em I was alone."

"Kinda made a liar out of you, old son, didn't we?" Parmlee said.

"What made you think I'd be at the Block R?"

"Well, addin' up what my wife an' Jud said, it looked like you had it in your head to settle with Beale."

"I never thought about you an' the rest tryin' to find me," Bill said.

"They know now what it's like to have night riders crack down," Parmlee said.

Rideout told what had happened; how he had run down the sign of the supposed outlaws, had passed up a chance to bush-whack Beale and his companions and had later gone on to the Block R to slap the frame-up charge in their teeth.

"Storm Tracey made out he didn't know anything about that angle," he concluded.

McQueen swung in close; he uttered a hoot of derision. "That old hellion is too foxy to ever let on he was mixed up in a dirty deal like that," he rasped. "He's a big ramrod, he is, but I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw a bull by the tail."

"He took my part when Beale accused me of shooting Charley Fair," Rideout persisted. "Then when guns got to swingin', he knocked over the table. If he hadn't I reckon I'd been there yet."

"That's all right, kid," Parmlee said, "but when the last showdown comes, Storm Tracey will try to have his heel on your neck."

Back at the Bar O, the hammer of hoofs brought Mrs. Parmlee to the door. As the older woman's worried eyes took quick count of the riders, Nan hurried down to the corral.

"You had us scared to death," Nan told Rideout, when they were walking back toward the ranchhouse. Her hand stole into his. Then: "You should have heard Babe asking God to take good care of you when she said her prayers."

"Reckon God must have been listenin'," Bill said soberly.

"It was the first time in a month she didn't ask God to send her a new doll," Nan said.

A lump came into Rideout's throat. "The poor kid," he said slowly.

When they went in to see the child, Babe had gone to sleep with her battered rag doll clutched tightly to her heart.

Mrs. Parmlee made coffee, and the men sat around the big kitchen, discussing the things that had happened and planning how to meet the menace that now threatened.

"There's no tellin' where that crowd will hand it to us first," Parmlee said. "But when they do I guess each outfit will have to defend itself the best way it can."

"We're goin' to have the sheriff in our hair, too," McQueen said. "An' if he gets his hooks into any of us, it's liable to mean the rope for some of us." He looked at Bill Rideout.

"Guess I killed Til Cass in the shoot-out over there tonight," Rideout said. "Maybe if I gave myself up, Beale an' them would be satisfied."

"That jail in Buffalo ain't big enough to hold the men that badge-toter is goin' to have to take if he comes after you," McQueen said.

"If that's how you feel, Jud," Bill said, "reckon I'll be ridin' back with you."

"Bill Rideout," Mrs. Parmlee cried, "if you do any more ridin' tonight, it will be over my dead body."

"Yeah, you better go to bed," Parmlee said. "You look like the dirty end of a hard winter."

"Tough luck, you bein' in front of the

bank when them hombres blew the lid off," Al Brush said.

"What are ye talkin' about, ye crotch-head!" snorted old Buffalo, grizzled veteran of the early Texas drives. "If Bill hadn't been there, the first we'd knowed of the trap them belly-crawlin' varmints was baitin' would been when the law come swarmin' down on us. We sabe now what we're up against."

"Yes," Longhorn Socks Sidell said, "an' if we never get in another lick, we had the pleasure of warpin' it to the Block R tonight."



OLD Storm Tracey adjusted the latigo strap to suit his taste, and he tested the saddle; then he hoisted himself up.

Flickering spearheads of flame licked up from the smouldering ruins of the Block R ranchhouse and sheds. The hay stacks, great blackened shapes, were still burning slowly. Men moved here and there; voices, edged like whetted knives, cut angrily through the semi-gloom.

Beale and Jarvis came up from the rope corral that penned the horses. The dull glow from a nearby stack touched old Storm, giving him the appearance of a stern figure cast in bronze.

"We'll have to make your place our headquarters now," Beal said.

"I'm washin' my hands of the whole business," Tracey said curtly.

"What do you mean?" There was a flicker of apprehension in Jarvis's voice.

"I'll fight till hell freezes to rid this country of rustlers and renegades," Tracey growled, "but I won't frame any-

body. That ain't the way I fight."

"Look," Jarvis said. "You don't mean to tell me you took any stock in Rideout's talk?"

"The boy was tellin' the truth," Tracey thundered, "and you know it. This fire threw the light of day on a lot of things, includin' those phoney horse brands and some of your own riders, Beale."

"Suit yourself, Storm," the other said. "But we're goin' through with what we started."

"Storm, you've changed your tune since Jim Rideout, Orley Jones, Tom Waggoner an' a few more were killed," Jarvis sneered.

"I had nothing to do with their murders," Storm retorted. "If some of my Rockin' T riders were mixed up in it, they were acting without my knowledge. Rideout and Waggoner were good men—a lot better than some I find on my side of the fence."

"You talk like a damned fool!" Beale snarled.

"I am," Tracey said. His voice softened, then. "I closed the door against the only thing I had left to love—my own flesh and blood."

Beale and Jarvis stared at the rugged figure in the saddle. They had been depending on the power and influence of Tracey to get them out of any tight spots. They were worried; Beale, in particular, for he had already started to build up a herd of his own at the expense of his English employees. He had planned to approach old Storm later, with a view to financing the purchase of such likely properties as the Bar O, the Cinch Buckle and others, after their owners had either been whipped to their knees or eliminated.

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"You're a pretty big figure in the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association," Beale said. "You've been in politics and you're close to the Governor. Be too bad if it got out that your reputation wasn't all it was supposed to be."

If Tracey heard, he gave no indication. His eyes were looking past Beale and Jarvis, far off toward the dim horizons of yesterday.

"I've spent the best part of my life pilin' up riches," the old cowman said slowly. "For what? I've neither chick nor child. I'm gettin' old. One day they'll put me in the ground and that will be the end of it."

"Snap out of it, Storm," Jarvis said petulantly. "We got things to talk over before you go."

"There's only blood and hatred on the Powder," Storm continued quietly. "The only human touch in this whole damn business was that busted china doll I picked out of the dirt there in Redstone." His voice trailed off. "I wonder now if Marlow has got another one just like it."

He touched spurs to his horse and rode off, a lone figure that was soon lost in the Wyoming night. . . .

The star of the law glinted on the vest of the foremost of the riders that turned into the yard of the Bar O, shortly before noon. Rideout was whistling out a willow whistle for Babe; the kid was watching with eager interest. He stopped and his eyes struck at the horsemen with quick apprehension.

With the Buffalo sheriff and two deputies were Duke Beale, Mitch Jarvis, Les Parrot, Fred Cuning and riders from the Block R and the Stirrup.

Ed Parmlee came up from the breaking corral, where Johnny Glass had been peeling a wild-eyed bronc. His face was set in hard lines. "This is it, Bill," he said.

Pete Crye had been mending a saddle. Old Buffalo was cleaning a rifle on the bunkhouse stoop. He flicked a jaundiced eye at the posse, then spat in the dirt.

The riders fanned out a little as they reined in; Beale moved up alongside the sheriff. "Figgered we'd find you here," he said. His eyes struck at Bill Rideout like hot sparks. "There's your man, Sheriff."

"Want you for the killin' of Til Cass at the Block R last night," the lawman said

shortly. He slid a glance, then, at Ed Parmlee.

Bill trimmed the lip of the peeled end of the willow stick, wet it by running it in his mouth and slipped on the tubular piece of bark. He blew on it. It whistled.

"See what Uncle Bill made!" Babe cried. "It's to take the place of the doll I almost got."

"Very nice," the sheriff said. It was evident that he didn't relish this business. Babe gave him a dimpled smile.

"Your Uncle Bill will have plenty time to make whistles where he's going," Jarvis said.

Bill Rideout gave the whistle to Babe and eased to his feet.

Nan had followed her father from the corral. Her lips were tight, but her head was up, her eyes blazing. Old Buffalo had finished cleaning the Winchester, and was poking cartridges into the magazine. They made small sounds against the tightening silence.

"We don't want any trouble, Parmlee," the sheriff said.

"Why don't you go after the men who held up the bank?" Nan said sharply.

"We know what we're doin'," Beale said.

"Rideout's been runnin' with Nate Champion an' all the rest of the hard cases in Hole-in-the-Wall," Fred Cuning said. "We're goin' to start by makin' an example of him."

"Let me handle this," the sheriff said. Then, to Bill Rideout: "Anything you say will be used against you."

"All right!" the cowboy cried. "I killed Cass, but he fired first, an' they was six to one."

"Hear him!" Les Parrot hooted. "Hell, Sheriff, he fired through the window."

"Maybe he's got some witnesses," Jarvis said gently.

"Where in the good hell would I get any witnesses?" Rideout snapped. "If I did have, who would believe them?" He'd been a fool, goin' to the Block R. It just meant he'd got the folks here at the Bar O into an ugly mess.

"You'll have your trial," the sheriff said, "all fair an' above board."

"There's no such thing as a fair trial any more," Parmlee said bitterly. "That's what the Cattlemen's War has done to

this country. No jury would dare acquit a rider for the little outfits held on a murder charge, regardless of the testimony."

"Looks like we got to do this the hard way," the sheriff said. His eyes had turned cold and bleak.

"Looks so," Parmlee said.

CHAPTER SIX

Big Ramrod of Powder River

RIDEOUT'S hands clenched. Beale and the others were playing smart. They knew they could make the Cass charge stick. They wanted to make out that he was a killer; the rest would be easy. The raid on the bank and the killing of Charley Fair could be loaded onto himself and his friends later.

Beale dropped his hand close to his gun-belt. "We're wastin' time, Sheriff," he said harshly.

Mrs. Parmlee stood in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked tired, careworn, but her calm was unbroken. "Babe, come into the house," she said. "I want you."

Old Buffalo straightened, cocked the Winchester. "I'll kill the first hombre that makes a pass!" he barked.

"Put down that gun, you ratty old buzzard!" the sheriff said.

The answer was only a snag-tooth grimace.

Johnny Glass came around the corral corner with a .30-30 at the ready. Pete Crye snagged a carbine from a saddle boot inside the door of the gear room. Nan whipped into the house, to reappear with a rifle.

The lawmen and the deputies exchanged glances. Beale cursed fitfully.

"Even the women got claws, Sheriff," Jarvis said. "You can see for yourself what we're up against. The thing will never be settled until these poverty spreads have been smashed."

"We won't be bluffed," Ed Parmlee said. "We'll—"

The brisk rattle of wheels on the dug road along the hill interrupted him. Two fast-stepping bays were whipping a buggy toward the ranch.

Beale twisted around in the saddle, then stabbed a look at Jarvis. There was no

mistaking the grizzled figure holding the reins. It was old Storm Tracey.

Ed Parmlee smiled thinly. "What did I tell you, kid?"

Bill Rideout remembered, all right. "*When the final showdown comes, Storm Tracey will try to have his heel on your neck.*"

The gnarled owner of the Powder Land and Cattle Company swung the spirited team into the yard and pulled up with a flourish. The horses were Morgans; the Concord buggy represented the best that money could buy.

"Whoa!" Storm roared. Under shaggy brows, his eyes were as bright as a bird's. He bobbed his head at the sheriff, glowered at Beale, Jarvis and the others.

"What's going on?" His voice was like thunder.

The sheriff explained.

"Harump!" Storm rumbled. "So that's how the land lies?" His lips tightened until they looked like a crack in a rock ledge. "Well, it so happens I was at the Block R last night." He eyed Bill Rideout, tugged at his weeping willow mustache thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you can talk sense into Parmlee and Rideout," the sheriff said.

"Yeah—and maybe I can tell the rest of you a few things."

Old Buffalo had moved forward, growling in his throat. "What do you want around here, ye ole varmint?"

Storm glared at him. "Put down that shootin' iron and hold these horses, you damned tarantula."

Buffalo blinked his watery eyes, hesitated a moment; then took his place at the heads of the high-strung animals, vaguely aware that Tracey's presence held out a thin thread of hope.

The old cowman wrapped the reins around the whip and climbed down. He walked around behind the buggy. Bill Rideout watched in amazement, as Storm took some packages from the wagon box.

Mrs. Parmlee was again standing in the door. Babe was peering past her skirts.

"Forgot your bundles in town yesterday, Rideout," Storm said. "I—er—happened to be over this way and brought 'em along."

Babe suddenly popped past Mrs. Parmlee, her eyes big and round. "Is—is one

of them for me?" Her voice quivered with excitement.

Old Storm Tracey stood for a moment, staring at her. Her eyes, he saw, were as blue as a summer sky; her hair was golden, like the sun shining on the Wyoming hills. "God bless my soul!" he murmured. "I had a little girl like you once." His voice trailed away.

Bill Rideout thought of that precious box containing the doll, flattened under the hoofs of those milling horses. He frowned. It was cruel, bringing that smashed doll here and building up Babe's hopes.

"Seems like one of these must be for some little girl," old Storm was saying.

"I'm the only little girl here," Babe said.

"Look, Storm," put in the sheriff, squirming uneasily in the saddle, "this is no time for—"

"Shut up!" the cowman clipped. He handed Babe, not a crushed torn thing, but a neatly done up, oblong package.

Bill Rideout's mouth came open, closed again. He couldn't believe his eyes. Was this Storm Tracey—the toughest, orneriest cattle tycoon in Wyoming—or was he dreaming? He looked at Parmlee.

Ed said, "The world is comin' to an end."

"I had a little girl once," Storm said softly. "She was very much like you."

Babe pulled away the string and wrapping paper and lifted off the box lid; then squealed her delight. The next moment she was running to Mrs. Parmlee.

"Her's got blue eyes," she piped. "An' yellow hair—just like me."

Bill Rideout shook himself loose from his trance. "Mister," he said, "I reckon I can never square with you for that."

"Forget it," Storm growled. He pulled around, then, to glare at the sheriff. "About that shooting at the Block R. If I was you, I'd forget it. Cass and Parrot there opened up with six-shooters. Rideout fired in self-defense."

"I heard different, Storm," the sheriff said. "I'm glad to get the right of it." The owner of the Powder Land and Cattle Company was a power in the state. He wielded a big stick at county elections.

"A lot of innocent men have been killed," Storm went on. "I'm talking

about Jim Rideout and Waggoner and some more. I've been blamed, but I had no part in it. This cowboy"—he jerked his head at Bill Rideout—"could have bushed us. He had his chance, but instead he went to the Block R and called the turn, like any man with guts would." He glowered around. "I could tell plenty."

"You said enough, Storm," Beale said ominously. "Just remember you ain't so big that you can't be whittled down."

"You threatenin' me, you damned pup?" Tracey snapped.

"I'll do more than threaten," Beale said, "if you don't keep your jaw shut."

The cowman cut around the buggy and snatched the whip from the socket.

"Damn you!" Beale gritted hoarsely; his hand slapped his gun butt.

Tracey struck the Block R man's horse; then laid the lash across the face of its rider. A deputy reined his mount between the two men. The sheriff spurred in and snatched the gun from Beale's holster.

Tracey was a cattle king. Beale was only manager for absentee owners.

"Get goin'," the sheriff ordered.

Mitch Jarvis jerked his head at the riders from the Block R and the Stirrup, and they swung away. Beale quieted his plunging horse. "This ain't the end of it," he said thickly. Then he rode after the others.



"IT WAS up south of Sheridan," Bill Rideout told old Storm, answering his queries about Babe. "Dad and I had made a drive to the railroad and were coming home. . . ." He told the story of finding her.

The lawmen had gone. Buffalo, Crye and Glass were hunkered beside the corral, discussing the cock-eyed world that was Wyoming. The others were still seated about the dinner table in the rambling kitchen.

"Didn't you get to learn anything about her folks?" Storm asked. He had hardly taken his eyes off Babe. Now she was perched on his knee, holding her new doll.

"No, not much," Rideout said. "Just that they'd had a tough time. This nester's woman said Babe was the image of her mother."

"I might have had a granddaughter like you," Storm said slowly, "if I hadn't been such a damned old fool. Maybe I have—somewhere. God knows."

"Her folks was named Jameson," Rideout said.

A second later the old cowman almost stopped breathing. His face turned white. "Jameson?" he said in a stunned voice. "Good God, that was the name of the young whipper-snapper—the man my daughter married!"

Then he was clutching Babe to him; tears were spilling down his leathery cheeks.

"You're mine!" he choked. "My own flesh and blood."

"Sakes alive!" Mrs. Parmlee said.

"Some folks have all the luck," Ed said. "The rich get richer an' the poor get poorer."

had sent Buffalo and Pete Crye to hitch up the team.

"That ain't any way to harness a horse, you whiskered old bat!" Storm Tracey howled.

"Harness the brute yoresef then!" squalled Buffalo, hurling the trappings at the other. "I ain't no groom fer the Powder Land an' Cattle Company."

Babe ran toward the kitchen, calling to Mrs. Parmlee. "Come quick! Buffalo and the man are havin' fun."

Old Storm dodged the flying harness, gasping with rage.

The bullet traced its path with a high whine, slapped a hole in the side of the gear room beyond, squarely in line with the spot where Tracey had been standing.

Bill Rideout yelled a warning, lunged to snatch up Babe. As he flung himself through the kitchen door, a second distant

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"And to think," Storm breathed, "that a busted doll could make the difference between a rich old reprobate and a rooting, tooting grandfather. Look, next time I go to Cheyenne, I'm going to buy the biggest doll—nope, I'll send to Omaha or Chicago, by God!"

Babe regarded him solemnly. "I think I'll always love Abigail the mostest," she said.

"Abigail is her old rag doll," Nan said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saddle Warriors of the Powder

"**W**HOA, yeh damn high-ker-flutin' knob-head!" screeched old Buffalo, making the third futile attempt to slap the harness on the spirited Morgan. "Whoa, damn yeh, 'fore I fergit I'm a peaceable man an' kick in yore belly!"

Old Storm was preparing to take his departure in mid-afternoon, and Parmlee

report came and another slug smashed into the casing.

Pete Crye let loose of the hackamore of the Morgan and jumped for cover. Storm stood bewildered on wide-spread legs, his eyes sweeping the rims that threw a horse-shoe around three sides of the ranch buildings. Buffalo jolted him with a violent shove. "Git, 'fore they shoot yore ears off!"

Storm started for the house at a blundering run, while lead flung up vicious geysers of dirt around him. He stumbled across the threshold and Nan slammed the door behind him.

"Why, the sneakin', murderin', white-livered curs," old Storm wheezed.

"This is Johnson County," Parmlee said, "and there's a war on."

"It used to be Sioux," Mrs. Parmlee said. "Now it's cattlemen." She added, "Stay away from the windows."

"This sort of thing has got to stop," Tracey said vaguely.

The curt spat of the Winchesters kept

up, slow-spaced, murderously calculating. Bullets battered the gear room, where Pete Crye and old Buffalo had taken shelter, smashed at the bunkhouse, punched in glass panes. At the corral, a horse went down screaming. A slug struck the stovepipe; another found the back kitchen window over the sink and plowed a furrow across the table. The sugar bowl dissolved in a white cloud.

Rideout said, "We got to chase 'em out of them rims before night or it's goin' to be tough."

"I said it would be risky for you to leave," Parmlee told Storm, "and likely not too pleasant if you stayed. Beale is a bad man to cross, and he and Jarvis have a lot of gun-hung men in the saddle."

"I've been a damn fool," Storm said, shaking his head. "Took me a long time to get my eyes open—too long." There was abject misery in his eyes. For the first time he looked whipped. "This is as much my fault as the others'."

Bill Rideout took a lariat from the sawed-in-two keg beside the door, where Ed Parmlee kept his pet ropes neatly coiled.

Nan moved up beside him, put her hand on his arm. "What are you going to do, Bill?"

"Dab a noose on one of those horses in the corral an' head for the Cinch Buckle. We got a shoot-out on our hands an' we're goin' to need help."

Storm Tracey looked at the girl. She was in love with this freckled young puncher—just like his daughter had been in love with that sod-buster not so long ago. He wondered if she would try to stop him from risking his life. He listened for her to say, "Don't! They'll kill you!" Or, "Let Pete Crye or Johnny Glass go." But she didn't.

Instead, she said quietly, "I know, Bill. We can't risk waiting for dark. You—you'll make it. You could always ride like a Sioux." She kissed him. . . .

Rideout crossed the yard, running, while a hundred knives slashed wickedly at his side. Bullets snarled about his ears, cuffed the ground, flung splinters from the corral poles. Another horse went down.

Glass came out of the bunkhouse, his barrel-hoop legs pumping. Pete Crye and Buffalo swarmed forth, yapping at

him, defying sudden death to side a pard when the need was there.

"Soon's I slap a noose on a horse, throw open that gate!" Bill yelled.

He straddled one of the lower poles, cocked a little wildcat noose and snared a pin-eared bronc; then he wrapped a dally on a snubbing post.

Johnny Glass had grabbed up a hackamore and was there now, panting, cursing. "Git away from this hoss! You don't work here!" Johnny wanted to go.

Pete Crye wanted to go. "Lemme up on that cayuse; you're half shot-up now."

"This is your outfit," Bill snarled at them. "Stay with it. I'm goin' after Jud an' the boys."

They boosted him up, and old Buffalo jerked open the gate; then slammed it shut as the cow horse bolted past.

The high poles of the breaking corral beyond gave him momentary protection; then the fence of the horse pasture and the willows along the creek below, as he rode flattened tight against the neck of the hard-running horse. Bullets hunted him, but he was soon out of range of those rifles on the rims.

Five miles east he crossed the Middle Fork and raced on toward the Cinch Buckle and Jud McQueen.

Fearing reprisal by Duke Beale and his men for the sacking of the Block R, McQueen had held his small crew at the home ranch. Before Bill Rideout had finished telling of the attack at the Bar O, punchers were screwing down their hulls.

Willie Lee and Al Brush streaked for the Longhorn and the Crazy E. The word was to rendezvous at the fork two miles east of Ed Parmlee's.



McQUEEN, his long, bony features showing hard and bleak under his hat's curled brim, was hunkered beside Bill Rideout in the coulee off the road. While they waited for the others to come up, they speculated on the number of fighting men they'd have to engage in the coming gunsmoke free-for-all in the rims.

Including Beale, Cunning and Les Parrot, there had been twelve with the sheriff. They figured six or seven from the Stir-

rup would have been brought in, and the rest of Beale's gunmen.

"Say about twenty-four," McQueen said grimly, "and they'll be fortified up in the rimrock until hell won't have it. If we can't jar 'em loose by dark, she's goin' to be a big evenin', kid, because part of that bunch will try to rush the Bar O as sure as shootin' makes dead men."

"I'm afraid of that," Bill said. "They showed their hand when they tried to kill Storm. He's tight-mouthed, an' they know it, but all he's got to do is put a bee in the ear of the Governor about that frame-up an' there'll be soldiers in here. I reckon they're more afraid of that than what he told the sheriff. If they get him out of the way, anythin' that happens at the Bar O tonight will be charged off to the Cattlemen's War."

With the arrival of the others, McQueen and Bill Rideout climbed into the saddle. They were fourteen all-told, grim fighting sons of Powder River.

A mile farther on, they dismounted. "We're afoot from now on," McQueen said. "Most of you have fought redskins, and you know it's on your belly in the rocks. Take your time an' don't take chances. Bill, you ain't in any shape for that kind of stuff, but as soon as it gets dark, yuh better ride into Ed's hay meadow an' keep an eye out for any of that bunch comin' in from below."

Bill nodded. "Good luck," he said.

An hour passed. Two. The Big Horns chased long shadows out of the foothills. Off toward the Bar O, buzzards circled, eyes on the dead horses that lay in the corral.

Then there was a shot, and a far-off echo racketing back. Other shots came; other thundering echoes were torn loose from the hills. . . .

Night poured down, smudging the brief twilight. Behind one of the flanking shoulders on the high rims, Bill Rideout watched rifles flashing in the gloom. He eased into the saddle and started for the open end of the draw that cradled the Bar O.

He entered the meadow and moved silently along the path cast by the willows. He made out the black outlines of the ranch buildings and stacks. Once he thought he saw a movement near the

creek; he tightened up. Then, suddenly, he caught the flicker of a match.

The next instant flame was licking at at hay stack. Almost at the same moment there was a white puff at the end of the long L, indicating ignited coal oil. Two figures skulked away.

The yard lighted up, and he saw Johnny Glass and Pete Crye running with buckets. Then, by the willows, muzzle flame licked out. A rifle cracked, and Johnny Glass spilled onto his face.

An eye for an eye. It was Duke Beale's turn now. Rideout jerked the saddle gun from its holster and spurred forward. He could make out pale faces and a tight huddle of horses.

The drum of hoofs came to him. A Winchester barked and a bullet struck through the willows. The cowboy pulled down his horse, piled from the saddle and slammed a shot at the group beyond.

A horse reared and fell kicking. There were oaths, the rasping voice of Duke Beale, cracking out commands. Men grabbed for loose bridle reins, fighting like spooked cattle trying to make a break-away.

Rideout levered a fresh cartridge home, then fired again. Mitch Jarvis had managed to paw into the saddle, cackling out the alarm. The next moment his mount collapsed, pinning him to earth.

The horses snorted, pitched, bolted, leaving their riders to fight it out on foot. Rideout moved in among the willows as lead lashed at him. He splashed into the shallow, narrow-banked creekbed and started forward.

Figures in the bright-lighted ranchyard were racing back and forth between the watering trough by the corral and the burning shed at the end of the L.

The firing on the rims lulled. Evidently the tide of battle was turning, one way or another. Then the tempo quickened again, but now the reports seemed farther away.

Then, through a break in the low-hanging branches, Bill Rideout saw something that froze his blood. Nan Parmlee, carrying a rifle, was running toward the creek. Once she stopped, brought the Winchester up and fired, while the blazing hay stack cast its brilliant red glow upon her.

BILL RIDEOUT yelled at her to go back, but it seemed that the sound of his voice only spurred her on. Slim and lithe she was, her hair blowing free, as she broke into a run again. Once she stumbled, but caught herself and kept coming.

Rideout churned out of the creek, fighting the tangle furiously, unaware that lead was snipping branches about him. He cleared the last overhanging willow and stopped, feet spread wide, pain tearing him apart.

The fire was widening its radius. He saw the square-built shape of Duke Beale. His carbine blazed. The Block R man stood for a moment, Winchester leveled, like a figure carved in stone; then he leaned forward and started down.

Nan Parmlee, born in a land carved from the raw by Winchester and Colt, was a sure shot, and when she dropped the .30-30's sight on Les Parrot, he was a dead Indian the instant her finger tripped the trigger.

Fred Cunning flung around to face this new threat, and, realizing that he was bracketed by blood-hungry gun-muzzles, took the short-cut out of the morass of dilemma by throwing up his hands.

A fifth member of the group, a Block R puncher, heaved into the willows, stumbled across the little creek and sought safety in flight.

While Mitch Jarvis screamed to be pulled from the dead horse that pinioned him, they stood for a moment, breathing hard, staring at each other—Nan and Bill Rideout—the glory of conquest and victory shining in their eyes. . . .

The wind that gushed down the draw carried the flames of the burning stack away from the ranchhouse and outbuildings. The fire that ran its hot, greedy tongues over the shed at the end of the wing was at last conquered.

Fred Cunning had been inducted into the bucket brigade that rushed water from the creek when the trough had been emptied, and was now helping Pete Crye to carry Mitch Jarvis to the house.

Old Storm mopped perspiration from his face. He lashed Cunning and Jarvis, hooting at their readiness to place a large share of the blame on Duke Beale, and charging him with being the instigator of

the frame-up intended to involve Ed Parmlee and his neighbors in the thing that had happened in Redstone.

In the meantime, the sound of firing on the rims had died away. The fight was over and the gun-riders had pulled out. Jud McQueen and the men with him finally came straggling in. But Al Brush did not come in.

At sun-up low-flying buzzards directed the search. There were, too, three sprawled figures that had been Beale's gun-fanged pack. Thus another bloody page of the Johnson County War was thumbed over.

However, for the little outfits of Hole-in-the-Wall the land was bright. They had old Storm Tracey to champion the cause now; old Storm, cattle king—and granddad.

He gave Fred Cunning and Mitch Jarvis a chance to lay their cards on the table—that or the whole thing, he assured them, would be tossed into the lap of the Governor.

They blamed Duke Beale for scheming to discredit certain of the little outfits, and said he had planned the holdup in Redstone. The gun-tough who had wantonly shot down Charley Fair, it was revealed, had been one of the men killed the night of the fight at the Block R.

The sheriff eventually reported that Bill Rideout had trailed the outlaws to the Block R and called Beale's hand. The shooting at the Bar O, he further set forth, had been an attempt by those involved to silence the cowboy and his friends with hot lead. Of course, there were a lot of things the lawman didn't tell, but as far as he was concerned, the slate was clean, and Fred Cunning and Mitch Jarvis were more than pleased to let it ride that way.

Babe went to live in the big ranchhouse of the Powder Land and Cattle Company. Mrs. Parmlee and Ed missed her mightily, but when the work was done that fall, they found themselves taken up with the marriage plans of Nan and Bill Rideout. And there was the further consolation that one day they, too, in the natural course of events, would become grandparents.

Toward that end they built their hopes, remembering that there are some things money cannot buy.

THE END

Doc Sick, true to the frontier sawbones' code, was willing to try anything once—like the time he cut out an appendix with a pair of fence-pliers and a harness knife!



Mark saw him, sleeves rolled up and an ominous, short-bladed knife in his hand. . . .

Doctor of Frontier Medicine

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

"D ID I ever tell you about that appendectomy I performed on Judd Haskell, using a shaving mirror and a pine knot for light, and a pair of fencing pliers and a harness knife for instruments?" asked old Doc Sick, tying the frayed shoestring from his sombrero under his wrinkled chin.

"Why, no," young Mark Tyo lied carefully.

He buttoned his yellow slicker securely across his broad chest, took a deep breath, and stepped out of the doctor's office, at

the edge of town. The rain, falling in an enormous sheet, caught his breath, and the wind flung his words back to Doc, who had stopped to wrestle with his door.

"I don't believe you ever did, Doc. Tell me about it."

"Well, it was this way—" Doc began, screaming into the storm.

They sloshed their way through the dark to the corral. Mark's horse stood shivering in the storm, securely tied to a post. Mark took down his rope, made a stiff loop, and twirled it at the doctor's

old roan, which was scorning the barn, to stand watching them in the rain.

The old doctor, limping about on his stiff right leg, where he had caught a rebel bullet in some long-gone Mexican insurrection, kept up a running complaint about the weather, the orneriness of Texas horses, and the foolishness that kept a medical men on the Western frontier. He seemed to have forgotten his story of the strange operation on Judd Haskell; but Mark knew Doc was only biding his time.

The old roan, veteran of many a midnight emergency call, and the only horse in Texas who would tolerate Doc's jumping-jack horsemanship, dodged the loop artfully. Mark stifled a curse and beat the stiffness out of his wet rope on the dripping fence-pole. He threw again. The old roan, knowing that all good things come to an end—even standing in the rain like a plumb fool, Mark thought—stuck his head into it.

Mark saddled him, and Doc Sick climbed stiffly aboard, where he sat clutching his little black bag like a witch on a broomstick. Mark mounted his own colt and set off down the trail. Doc followed.

"What's the matter with Ed?" Doc called. "You plumb forgot to tell me. I'd kinder like to know what kind of a case this is."

"Oh, Ed got in a rumpus with one of the Shinn boys and run him out of Novak's saloon," Mark called back. "Chased him clear up to Bouquet Springs, where Shinn's trail branches off from ourn. We've got a well there, and Ed made the mistake of stoppin' to mend the windmill. While he was up on the tower, Shinn shot him in the leg."

"Somebody ought to learn them Shinns a lesson," Doc said angrily. "Waiting till a man's up on a windmill tower!"

"I already did," Mark said, with a grim laugh. "I stopped in at Shinn's place on my way over and told the old man to punish that ambusher or I would. You should of seen that old man lay into that big, strappin' six-foot kid of his. It was Cliff did it. He ain't had no bringin' up. Old Man Shinn is ornery, and I guess he's shot up plenty of towns, but he never shot no man off a windmill tower. He

was just as shamed as he could be."

"Leg," mused Doc Sick, through the rain. "So Ed's laid up with a hole in his leg. You mean to say you called me out on a night like this just to plug up a perforated leg? I dunno what this country's comin' to. I seen the time—"

"It knocked Ed off the tower and busted something, Doc," Mark interrupted. "His whole leg's swoll up something awful, and black as your hat."

"Sounds like blood-pizen," Doc complained. "I suppose it'll be too late by the time we get there. When did it happen?"

"Friday," said Mark. "I would of come sooner, only Ed promised Floyd Martell, the new man who bought the old 4-X south of us, we'd help him get up a few loads of yearlins for a buyer. I had to go."

This was Sunday.

"No lights, no nothing," Doc said peevishly. "I'd go back East to practice, except for leavin' old Roanie here. Reminds me of an operation I performed on Judd Haskell. I tuk out his appendix, with only a shavin' mirror, a pine knot, a pair of fence pliers and a harness knife. Did I ever tell you about that, Mark? That was before you was born."

"Why, no," said Mark, for the thousandth time, "I don't believe you ever did. Tell me about it. It sounds right interestin'."

It would help pass the time. He checked his impatient horse to the roan's deliberate pace, hunched himself down in the saddle against the storm, and listened.

"We were up in the Siskiyou one winter, trappin'," Doc said, fortifying himself with a huge bite of twist tobacco.

"Snowed in. Got caught away from camp in a storm and had to hole up with our packs in an old Injun hut. Along about the fifth day, Judd began to complain of a pain in his belly. I knowed it wasn't from nothin' he et, because we hadn't et nothin'. So I tuk his temperature."

"How'd you happen to have your thermometer along, Doc?" Mark asked. He had always wanted to ask this question.

A flash of lightning showed him that the torrent had all but obliterated the steep downward trail ahead of them. The

sharp slope was a glassy mirror of mud. The colt put back his ears and refused. Mark heeled him sharply, put him over the edge, and cocked his ear back for the Doc's words as the roan followed awkwardly.

"I didn't need no thermometer," Doc panted. "I held my thumb in his mouth. I got a talented thumb. I can tell within five-tenths of a degree.

"I knowed it was appendicitis. I was just halfway through medical school then. Took time out to trap me money enough to pay for the rest. I didn't know how to perform such an operation, but I knowed that appendix had to come out.

"'Judd,' I says, 'you got one chance in a thousand if I operate with real instruments, which I ain't got. You got one chance in ten thousand if I cobble up an operation with what we got to do it with. You got one chance in ten million if we don't operate. What do you say?'

"'Start cuttin',' says Judd. 'I never had no luck on long odds. Hand me that whiskey bottle and see if you can cut out this pain.'

"So I gave him a couple of good stiff drinks and stretched him out on the Injun's bunk. I set f'ar to a pine knot for light. Then I found an old shavin' mirror, that somebody had probably swapped to the Injun for three-four thousand acres of grazin' land, and propped it up so that it focussed the light on Judd's middle. Then I—"



HIS words were drowned by a sudden, ground-shaking clap of thunder, but Mark knew the story by heart this far. At poker games, in livery-stable gossip sessions, the old doctor had but one refrain. Mark guessed that every rancher within two hundred Panhandle miles knew the story of Doc's famous fence pliers operation.

The slope suddenly ended in a rushing torrent, so wide Mark's straining eyes could not find the other bank.

"What is it?" Doc interrupted his story to shout.

"Mackey's wash," Mark said in a troubled voice. "Wasn't no water to speak of here when I came across. Must of had a

cloudburst up the line. A damn big one!"

He heard the roan's cautious steps in the mud, and the doctor's voice came from beside him. "Sufferin' snakes! Look at that flood. You and Ed picked a fine place to take up land, on the wrong side of that. How do we get across?"

Mark frowned. "I don't know. Wait here a minute, and I'll see what I can figure out."

He left the old doctor, a shivering, crow-like black hump on the old roan, and picked his way carefully down the bank of the roaring "dry wash" a few hundred rods. When he returned, he found the doctor still hunched in the driving rain on the motionless roan.

"One way we got a chance to get across," Mark apologized. "We just about have to take it. We never can get back up that slippery slope, and there's no use goin' upstream—it's deep and narrer, with high banks, up there. But it's risky, Doc, for an old man."

"Not as risky as waitin' here for the flood to catch up," Doc said spiritedly. "Let's do something."

"Here's how. It's too fast a current for the horses to make it across, with us and the saddles," Mark explained. "Now, there's a big tree just around the bend that almost spans the water. I think it's that cottonwood from the crossroads up by Pedro Blanco's place.

"I figger I can take the saddles and your medicine bag, and go out on that tree as far as it goes. You stay here, and give me five minutes. Then you put the horses into the water and head 'em for the other bank. I figger the pull of the current will just about bring them under me as they go past the tree, and I think maybe I can catch them if you've got their bridle-reins up over their ears in a knot, like."

"And if you don't?" Doc grinned.

"Well, then we walk," Mark confessed. "But if I do, I think we can make it from the end of the tree to the other bank. All that worries me is whether you ought to risk it."

But the doctor was already dismounting stiffly. Mark grinned.

"Longer we stand here and palaver, the higher and faster that water gits," Doc said. "All right, git goin'. I'll allow

you five minutes. Lose the saddles if you have to, but don't lose my kit."

"I won't," Mark promised. "I reckon Ed'll need every trick in it."

He shouldered the saddles and the kit and started downstream. Behind him, Doc was tying the reins in stiff bows over the horses' heads.

The water had risen in the few moments he had talked with Doc, and the tree was weaving dangerously, as though trying to decide whether to yield to the current or cling a few moments longer. He saw two longhorn cows, their white eyes rolling in the dark, pedalling downstream. They ducked their heads under the arching trunk; he heard the click of their horns, and then they were gone.

He waited for a flash of lightning, and found that by now he would have to jump to reach the tree at all. A few moments back, the root ends had lain securely on his bank.

He shifted the saddles to better balance and jumped, fighting for foothold on the crumbling, sodden bark. He felt one saddle go, but he had to use both hands to hold on.

When he looked, he saw that it was Doc's saddle. It had caught by a stirrup on a jutting snag, and he snatched it to safety just before the current tore it loose. He made his way across the tree on all fours, his heavy load throwing him perilously off balance at times. The rain drove furiously down his slicker collar, propelled by a howling wind.

Where the top of the tree dipped into the black, rushing water, Mark waited. He piled the two saddles into the limbs, took a firm hold of the doctor's medicine kit, and waited.

In less time than he had expected he heard a snorting and threshing, and a lucky flash of lightning showed him the two horses, swimming side by side just below him. He leaned down and caught them easily. Doc had done his part well.

The roan, seemingly used to anything, offered no objection, but his own colt snorted in terror and fought back. The contest was brief but violent. Holding the two sets of reins with one hand, the bag with the other, Mark wrapped his legs around the rapidly submerging tree trunk and held on grimly. The current favored

him, and helped wear the colt down.

Gradually the roan worked toward the other bank, feeling his way to the full length of the reins. Mark realized that the wise old horse had found footing. He released the roan, seized the saddle somehow, and slipped into the water with his burden beside his own horse.

"Git us out of here, you son-of-a-gun," he urged the horse prayerfully.



HE WAS thankful that the wash had a sand bottom. Mud would have foundered the animal and drowned them both. As it was, he had only to hold the horse's mane and keep out of the way of its flailing hoofs.

The roan was waiting patiently at the water's edge. Mark coughed muddy water and saddled his own horse first. Once he felt the familiar cinch tighten around his barrel, the horse seemed reassured. He grew quiet, and was content to turn his tail to the storm and wait.

"Hey, Mark. Where the hades did you say that tree was?"

The doctor's voice came eerily from across the stream. Mark peered into the darkness. While he was getting to the bank, the current had dislodged the big tree and taken it away. One minute more, and he would have been gone with it.

He cursed bitterly. He had the doctor's horse and the doctor's medicine on the proper side of the torrent, but neither could save Ed without the doctor.

"Toss me one end of your rope." He heard Doc's cracked old voice, distorted by the wind. "I don't want to get caught here on this side with this water risin'."

"T'ain't long enough," Mark shouted back. "Wait a minute—I'll wade out a ways, and you wade out a ways. It's worst in the middle, anyway."

He uncoiled his rope and again stepped into the chill water. The powerful current almost swept him from his feet. He dared venture no farther than waist deep. He swung the rope mightily and flung it across the black water.

In a moment he felt it tugging limply downstream, and he knew he had missed. In a slight quiver of panic, he pulled it in and cast again.

"You're the gent that calls himself the best roper in the Panhandle," he heard the doctor deride him. "Throw it upstream of me, and let it float down."

He did as Doc suggested, fighting against the paralyzing force and cold of the current. If it affected him this way, what must it be doing to Doc's aged frame?

"Wrap it around you!" he bellowed. "Don't trust your grip."

He felt a heavy pull at the end of the line.

"Here I come!" came the doctor's shrill voice.

Mark bore back sharply on the rope, digging his heels into the yielding sand bottom in an effort to regain the bank. He feared he had pulled the doctor under, but he had to get firmer footing or both would have gone down the stream. The tremendous force of the current strained at the rope, at his arms. His heart seemed about to burst with the effort of keeping his balance, of furnishing power to keep pumping his high heels into the sandy bottom.

Suddenly he felt something at his back. It was the doctor's old roan, standing knee-deep in the water and peering curiously at the commotion. Mark took a quick half-hitch around one wrist with the rope. With the other hand he snatched at the horse's mane.

"Git!" he said hoarsely. "Up the bank, you Roanie!"

The roan moved deliberately. He seemed to take his time, but when Mark's head cleared he was standing out of the water. He reeled in the rope and brought the doctor, sputtering and choking, up the bank. Mark steadied the old man with

one hand, pounded his back with the other.

"Lost my chaw, dang it," Doc muttered. "For a 'dry' wash, I'd say that one is fair-to-middlin' wet. Reminds me of the time I performed an emergency operation on a friend of mine up in the Siskiyous. Fellow by the name of Judd Haskell. Everything to do, and nothing to do it with. I ever tell you about it?"

"Why, no," Mark said, as they mounted. "But it sounds right interestin'. I wish you would."

He heard the rambling monologue behind him as they rode. The rain still beat down, but the footing was better now that they were away from the town, and they could safely push their horses. Mark had to hold his own impatient colt back to the unhurried gait of the roan.

He had hoped to stop at Kinney's place and dry out, but the gorge was full of rushing water and Kinney's bridge had long since gone down the stream. They saw the lights in Kinney's cabin gleaming through the rain, and they knew that inside the rancher and his family were snug and dry.

"I could do with some coffee," Doc said wistfully. "But if we can't, son, we can't."

"It's only fifteen more miles," Mark comforted. "We'll cut through Kinney's upper pasture here, and follow the creek a ways. It'll save."

The doctor waited, while Mark lowered the wires. They crossed, and Mark raised the fence again. This trail was familiar to his horse, for some of his and Ed's stock sometimes found their way down here, and the colt had learned the cow-pony's trade in Kinney's upper pasture. He danced and curvetted, fighting the bit, but

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the doctor's old roan shambled along at the same even pace.

"Hold up a minute, Mark," Doc called through the darkness. "I think I see a newborn calf. We better get him in the dry or Kinney'll lose him."

"We ain't got time," Mark disagreed. "Anyway, what could we do for a calf, out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"We can't just leave him to drown," Doc snapped, and Mark knew by his voice he had already dismounted.

"Hold that fool cow away from me, Mark, and let me see if I can hear the little feller out."



THE cow had found a shallow, weed-grown depression in which to drop her calf, a soft bed which had become a miniature lake as the rain fell. She was standing in water up to her hocks, trying to worry the half-dead calf to its feet. She snorted suspiciously as Doc got down off his horse, and charged him as he made for the calf.

Mark nudged the colt between her and the doctor. Three times she charged, and three times Mark's horse expertly turned her, while the doctor tugged and strained and complained until he had the calf on its feet on dry land.

"Can't just leave a dyin' thing without at least a look at it," Doc said into the wind. "Yonder's shelter, under that overhangin' rock. This is one of Kinney's good whitefaces. He'd not thank us to let it drown."

The calf collapsed suddenly, its rickety legs giving way under it.

"Toss me that whiskey bottle, Mark," Doc shouted.

Mark tossed him the quart bottle from the saddle bags on the roan, and spun his own horse just in time to save Doc from the angry cow again. Doc pocketed the bottle. He stooped and put his head under the calf's belly and straightened unsteadily. The calf bawled in terror to find himself high in the air, and the old man limped to the sheltering rock.

The cow had disappeared into the dark. Mark located her just in time to keep her from charging the doctor again.

Suddenly he heard two gunshots ham-

mer through the rain, and he saw the flashes in the shelter where Doc stood with the calf.

"Nothin' but rattlesnakes," Doc shouted reassuringly. "I blowed one's head off, but I missed the other. Wait a minute."

Mark waited, while the old doctor hunted in the dark for the escaped snake. The rain hammered down. After what seemed like hours, the doctor's gun roared again.

"Got him that time," Doc cackled delightedly. "Now, a little snort for the critter here, and we're on our way. Pays to keep your gun dry, even when you go swimmin' in a dry wash. I knowed there'd be snakes here in the dry. Hold up your head, feller. It's pretty young to be takin' likker, but seein' as how it won't never have a chance to get the habit—"

Mark heard a strangled bawl as the burning whiskey went down the calf's throat; but when Doc had remounted, Mark saw that the cow had rejoined the calf, which was sucking vigorously.

"Great stuff, whiskey, when it's used right," Doc commented. "Shouldn't wonder but what a little stimulant is what we need. I reckon I've got as much rights as a calf."

"I reckon," Mark agreed soberly, marveling at the old man's inexhaustible vitality.

They drank deeply, and Doc tucked the bottle back in its saddle pocket. They rode on.

"Six hours since I left Ed," Mark observed. "I hope it ain't too late."

"Ed's tough," Doc said. "That calf wasn't. Maybe in three years Kinney can sell him for a top steer and pay his doctor bill. Man's got to look out for his own interests in this country. Kinney would of paid for that last kid of his, only he got a chance to get that whiteface bull cheap. You can't blame him."

"No," said Mark, tucking his chin into his shoulder and turning his head from the slashing rain. "Whitefaces will be the makin' of this country. Ed and me, we've got a few."

"Well, Kinney's got one more than he'd of had if we hadn't rode this way," Doc said. "Wonderful what a little whiskey can do. Wonderful what a man can do when he has to. Like the time I op-

erated on Judd Haskell by the light of a pine-knot torch. I used a pair of fence-pliers for clamps. Ever tell you about that?"

"No," said Mark. "Here's the other fence. Wait till I get this fence down, and then tell me. It sounds interestin'."

He dismounted stiffly to lower the wires, and the doctor rode across. Mark's colt followed.

Suddenly Mark heard the old roan grunt, and both horses disappeared before his very eyes. Mud splashed up in his face from suddenly galvanized hoofs, and Mark shouted in alarm.

"Kinney's bull! See if you can locate your fool cayuse while I hold the critter back!" Doc shouted.

Then Mark saw the animal, his huge white head swaying toward him in the dark, his stubby, wicked horns gleaming in the quick dazzle of lightning. In the same flash, Mark knew the bull had seen him.

A man on horseback is safe from a range-bred animal, but no man is ever safe from a barn-bred bull recently freed on the range. His heart in his throat, Mark sprinted for his horse. He heard the bull behind him, and again mud, driven like bullets, hit him in the face as he caught the colt's reins. Then somewhere in the distance he heard the Doc's delighted profanity.

Mark did not remember getting on his horse. But there he was, trying to still his pounding chest. In another flash, he saw the bull trotting sedately back over the lowered fence, urged on by the close-crowding roan.

"Roanie used to be a right smart of a cow-pony in his days," Mark observed, as he repaired the fence. "I thought he'd outlived that time, though."

"He just ain't got good sense," Doc said proudly, patting the roan's bony withers. "Like me. Both of us belong dead, yet here we are roustin' bulls around in a rainstorm in the middle of the night. How much farther to the place now?"

"Right over the ridge yonder. If we can make it over the slope directly, it's say three miles. If we go around, five."

"Let's go over."

"There's not much of a trail in good

weather, and there won't be any tonight," Mark warned. "It's rough."

"A little ridge like that?" Doc said scornfully. "Let's go, cowboy. I was brought up in mountains. I spent a winter in the Siskiyou once, trappin' with Judd Haskell. Made six hundred dollars, not countin' a free operation I gave Judd with a pine knot, a shavin' mirror, a pair of fence pliers and a harness knife. I'll tell you about it."

"Do," said Mark.



UP THE slope they pushed, finding the worn cow-path to be a running rivulet, brush-strewn and pitted. Mark's horse, young and angry and impatient, fought the slope in short rushes. The old roan behind grunted with every step, picking its way along like an aged mountain goat, conserving every ounce of energy.

Mark heard the cracked old voice talking in the wind behind him: "... I made a kind of a lop-sided incision, and he was bleedin' pretty bad, but no worse than I'd seen many a horse bleed and live. Judd was tough as any mustang that ever lived. Well, I see the appendix layin' there, just like in pictures. So I took holt of it—"

"Watch yourself," Mark called out. "We're headin' down. It's narrow along this shelf, and it's three hundred foot to the bottom. Give your horse his head."

"I never do nothin' else with him," Doc grumbled. "What a place for a man to live! You and Ed ain't got a lick of sense. You'll always be bachelors. What woman worth her salt'd live out here, where you got to skin around cliffs like a squirrel to git home?"

"It's all right in good weather," Mark apologized. "You come up from the valley, then. Ed's girl is coming out to marry him and keep house for us next month. That is," he added, "if Ed pulls through this."

"Well, all I can sav is she must be plumb crazy," Doc said witheringly.

"She's my sister," Mark said gently. "Ed and I was raised together, back in Missouri."

"That proves it," Doc cackled. "She

probably ain't no brighter than you. Whew! I wisht that lightning hadn't flashed. I looked down and saw bottom then. I'd rather not see where I'm goin' to fall."

"We're past it, almost."

The trail slanted steeply down before them now.

"Yonder's our place," Mark pointed out. "See the lights! Must be somebody there. Ed's in no shape to make a light."

His colt snickered, and several horses answered from the corral.

"That sounds like Floyd Martell's sorrel. Yep, there he is. I see his bald face in the lean-to shed."

They had entered the familiar yard. Doc dropped down stiffly and stamped his feet in the mud.

"You tend to the hosses. I'll go right inside," he said. "You might favor old Roanie a little, Mark. He ain't as young as he oncet was."

"You see to Ed," Mark begged. "Don't you worry about Roanie."

Doc hurried inside, carrying his precious black kit, and Mark took the horses to the corral. He put Roanie in the dry shed with Martell's sorrel, and treated him to a precious quart of barley.

As he was scraping the mud from his feet on the stone flag before the kitchen door, it opened and Floyd Martell looked out.

"Hello, Floyd. What brings you here?"

"I was lookin' for some stray hosses and had to duck out of the storm. Good thing I did. Ed's out of his head and wants to set the house on fire. He's bad, Mark."

"Doc will fix him," Mark said stoutly.

He heard Ed's voice from the bunk in the corner inside. His partner had heard and recognized his voice.

"Mark! Mark!" the sick man moaned, deliriously. "Ontie me. They got me tied down. Don't let a feller down, Mark. They got wires 'round my leg."

"You get out of here, Mark Tyo!" Doc ordered shrilly. Mark saw him, sleeves rolled up and an ominous, short-bladed knife in his hand, stooping over the raving man on the bunk.

"You just upset him," Doc complained. "You, stranger, git in here and wash your hands. We got to operate quick."

"Are you going to take his leg off?" Mark said sharply.

"If I have to!" Doc snapped. "Right now I'm just goin' to dreen it a little. Wash them big hands good, stranger. If you begin to git sick, just play like it's a wire-cut hoss you're workin' on. That'll help."

Mark shut the door quickly. He was glad Doc had drafted Martell for the job of helping him. He and Ed had been partners here for almost five years, building this place up a little at a time. He had the vision of his sister's face before him. Back in Missouri, she was probably all packed up and waiting for word to come out. Maybe she had already started. If anything happened to Ed . . .

Mark listened at the door. He heard the drone of Doc's voice.

"At least I got chloroform this time, and a little tincture of opium, and a coal-oil lamp, and a few tools. Oncet I performed a major operation with nothing but a pine knot, a pair of—"

Mark slipped away to the barn. The old roan had finished the barley and was dozing contentedly. Mark found a gunny-sack and, for lack of any better way to pass the time, rubbed the horse down thoroughly. The roan seemed surprised at such tender treatment, but after a moment he liked it and grunted very contentedly.

Mark rubbed energetically, until the horse was dry and fluffy. It was better than sitting around.

The rain had tempered to a steady, beating drizzle. The thunder and lightning seemed to have moved on across the rolling slopes.

There was nothing to do but wait. Wait . . .

He lit a lantern and got down Ed's old saddle. Might never need it again, but he had to have something to do. From a shelf he took a pair of curved needles, an awl, and a ball of waxed thread. Always wanted to find time to mend the cussed thing . . .



WHEN Floyd Martell came in the barn, just before sunrise, Mark had fallen asleep over the neatly repaired sad-

dle. He started guiltily. Then quickly, he was on his feet.

"How's Ed?"

"Fine. You believe that or not," said Martell, in a puzzled tone, "but he's just fine. It wasn't blood-pizen. The black and blue came from the bruise; where he fell off the windmill. Doc just dreened Shinn's bullet wound a little. Say, what's that story of his about operatin' on a guy with a pair of fence pliers? Did you ever hear him tell it?"

"A thousand times," Mark said in a tired voice.

"How'd it come out?"

"I don't know," Mark confessed. "Nobody does. He never gets to the end of it. He just keeps tellin' and tellin', and if he ever quits, you know it's time to call out the rubber-tired hearse. He is a great hombre."

"Mark! You fellers down there at the barn!" a shrill voice called. "Where's the vittles? I got coffee b'ilin', but I can't find a danged thing to eat. Rustle me some damn breakfast, afore I die of starvation."

Mark ran eagerly to the house. Doc was leaning over the sick man in the corner, counting his pulse with a satisfied manner. The invigorating odor of fresh coffee was already competing with the sickly smell of chloroform. The light of health was returning to the room.

Mark thumped a pan of biscuits together, sliced bacon and dropped it into a smoking pan, and set the sorghum bucket on the back of the stove to warm. The resulting aroma was fine.

"I'll pull off my boots and dry out my socks before I start back," Doc said, falling into a chair with a sigh. "This is a sight pleasant, after that there ride last night. Reminds me of a winter I spent in the Siskiyou. Tuk my partner's appendix out with nothin' but a harness knife and a pair of fence pliers for tools, and a pine-knot torch and a shavin' mirror for light. Did I ever tell you about that incident, Mark?" The old man's eyes had closed.

"Why, no," Mark said, turning the bacon. "I don't believe you ever did. Tell us about it."

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Confederacy. But would either risk a river grave for his code
★ *when they and the girl they loved were beating down a water-* ★
way of damnation aboard a munitions-jammed Hell-bound ★
★ *packet—manned by a pirate crew whose love of country* ★
meant selling quick death to North and South alike?

**By FRANK
BONHAM**



Parson Hogg stood with his back to the wheel, his whiskered face distorted, the gun in his hand spewing flame.

GOES TO WAR

CHAPTER ONE

Last Packet Out of Hell

THEY'D had their differences, Todd Macon and Jasper Peacock, yet never before an argument they couldn't thresh out in a day's wrangling.

But tonight, as darkness closed in upon the deserted Cincinnati wharves, they sat in glum silence at opposite sides of the lamplit wheelhouse.

Neither man could give an inch and ever again look his conscience in the eye. They were in a deadlock, with time crowding them close. Todd's lean face was hard as



A smashing novelette of Civil War in the Far West

he twisted his black New Orleans cheroot above the lamp chimney until it began to smoke. All over the nation, he knew, partners like Jasper and him, families, even, were being pried apart by the bloody wedge that had been driven into the heart of the country.

Down in South Carolina a fort had been shelled. There was no longer the slimmest hope that the nation's differences could be fought on the floor of Congress. The smell of blood and powder-smoke was in the air, and millions of men were leaving farm and office to rush to the front.

From the windows of the wheelhouse, Todd Macon could see the cobblestone waterfront climbing to the city. In the deep dusk it was deserted, the stones, damp from an afternoon shower, stained a dull red by the setting sun. Only three other steamboats lay sawing at their spiles; two of them were already smoking up.

Along the wharves, peace—but up in the city bonfires crackled at street intersections and crowds formed and dissipated like dust whirls along a wind-whipped way. The Queen City had worn her neutrality like a crown. But Abe Lincoln had at last called upon her for loyalty. In a matter of hours, it would be known whether the rebel element or the loyal would take the ascendancy in the sprawling Ohio River trade town. Her wharf-boats were jammed with tons of pork consigned to Charleston, with tubs of butter and sacks of wheat the Confederacy was counting on to help feed her soldiers during the winter.

Up river and down, churning paddles threshed the river to foam as packets sought safety in waters of known stripe. Southern boats raced south to beat the blockade at Cairo, northern captains reaching for Pittsburgh, should Cincinnati go rebel. But the *Natchez* still lay nuzzling her rope bumpers, undecided. . . .

Julie, Jasper Peacock's eighteen-year-old daughter, angrily kicked the draft of the stove shut. "Are you two going to sit there all night stickin' your jaws out at each other?" she demanded. "We're the last packet in town—but three. You'll never settle this without getting up on your hind legs and caterwaulin' a little."

Todd spoke without turning from the

window. "No more caterwaulin' to be done. Far as I can see, we'd as well get busy with saws and cut this tub in two. You and Jasper can take your half down to Memphis. I'll straighten up for Pittsburgh."

Against the red glow of the city he was sketched in long, straight strokes. Todd was tall and lean, with muscles that grew close to the bone. His face was long, lanky-featured and brown. His eyes were the sultry color of the river at flood.

"Bring on your saws," Jasper Peacock said. "The *Natchez* is South right down to the bull rails—and south she's a-goin' if she hoists a bucket."

The lamp put specks of gilt in Todd's eyes as he turned. "She's south like Boston baked beans! They laid her keel-battens in Paducah. Paducah declared for Abe Lincoln last week. Besides, you ain't going to find a free crew to take a boat into slave territory in this town. Those gents are holdin' onto what they've got. If she pulls out of here at all, it'll be up-river. You might as well give up, Jasper. You're licked six ways from nothin'."

Jasper Peacock got up on his short, bowed legs, a squinty-eyed mastiff of a man, deep-chested, heavy and hairy of limb. His ears were big, his scarred face full of crow's feet and deeper lines. He wore his leather-visored pilot's cap at right angles to his face. As tough a man, for his size, as ever tromped a wheel, river-men called him.

"I was hopin' you'd listen to reason and save me having to play my ace," he said. "But you're as pig-headed as all the rest of the damned Yankees. I've got my legal rights as captain of this boat, just like every state's got the right to govern herself. And no ex-mud-clerk's going to stand in the way. Julie, ring up a head o' steam!"

"Comin' up, Pop!" It was what Julie Peacock had been waiting for. She hurried forward and reached for a bell-pull. On his long legs Todd Macon was there an instant sooner. He had her wrist in a hurting grip as he yanked her aside and faced Jasper.

"None o' that, you broken-down old reb! Not a paddle does she turn while I've got half the stock in this outfit."

Julie tried to break loose. She was long-

legged and wiry, clad in a striped jersey and short skirt, and she had temper to match her strength. But Todd's big hand kept her from reaching the cord.

Across the threadbare carpet Jasper came like an ice-breaker attacking a head of mush-ice: Todd's wide mouth broke into a grin and he thrust the girl away from him.

"Gonna tune my whistle, eh? Well, lower the heel and pitch in! It's as good a way as any of settling it!"

"Cut it out, now, you two!" Julie cried out. But she had the common sense to grab a chair out of the middle of the floor as they began to circle.

A distraction came, in the sound of a heavy and uneven stride crossing the hurricane deck to the pilot house stairs. There was an arresting quality of strangeness in the sound—an eerie thump-and-drag that conjured a picture of a cripple dragging himself up the steep companionway—that caused both men to turn slowly to face the door.



THEY were standing like that when the door opened. It seemed at first as though two men must have been coming through at once. Then the stranger came into the light and Todd saw that it was only one man, though he filled the portal to bulging.

He stood in the lamplight, a white-bearded, fanatical-eyed giant leaning on a thick cherry-wood staff carved like a snake. The fires of hell lighted his eyes. His nose was like a scimitar, his beard a stringy, square-cut tangle of dirty gray hair. Todd stared at him, thinking that if ever there had been a zealot, a prophet, this was he. He thought of Brigham Young and John Brown, and Moses.

"My sons, my sons!" His voice was the rumbling of boulders down a subterranean river bed. "On this night of nights, with a thousand brothers at one another's throats, must honest boatmen like yourselves go mad with hatred?"

"Honest?" Jasper snorted. "He's a low-livin', cross-compound son of—"

"Peace!" The prophet raised his serpentine staff. "I did not come here to listen to profane ravings."

Jasper's eyes snapped. "There ain't nobody holdin' you back if the language gets too hair-chested for ye."

The stranger's eyes flashed, but his answer was restrained. "Would you gentlemen be good enough to offer me a chair? My leg—" He rapped his thigh with a knuckle, bringing forth a hollow sound. "A poor, dead thing of wood and steel. Tires a man to come far on it, and I've walked a weary way."

Todd spun the chair. "Sit down," he said quickly.

Lowering himself, the big man fought with his artificial limb and failed to make it bend. Savagely he attacked it with his staff, until a rusty joint creaked and he fell into the chair. Then he looked up at the partners, breathing hard.

"Now, then! My name is Hogg. Parson Hogg, late of Bentonville. I've rowed, walked and ridden seventy-five miles to hire a boat. Now I find only four boats in town. The captains of three of them, being cowards, would not listen to my proposition. There remain you gentlemen. May I ask where your sentiments lie—with Lincoln or Jeff Davis?"

"We were just settling that," Todd said, "when you came in."

"Perhaps my proposition will help you to decide. Would you be interested in a trip of four hundred miles at four dollars a mile?"

Julie Peacock's tanned face lighted up. "Would we?"

"Politics permitting," Jasper qualified. The black hairs of Hogg's brows, sticking up like pitchfork tines, pulled in toward the bridge of his nose. "Politics!" he muttered. "The devil's bait to lead peace-loving men from the way of righteousness. Well, here is my problem. You know Father Amos?"

Their blank looks caused him to rap the floor impatiently with his staff. "I see you do not! Father Amos is a true laborer in the vineyard of the Almighty. At Cow Island, below Bentonville, he has a church and nearly a hundred followers. I say 'has,' but, unfortunately, the town went rebel yesterday and burned his church because he had preached Union. Father Amos and his band managed to escape, but their homes have been destroyed.

Resentment kindled on Jasper's red

face. "Name your business, Hogg."

Hogg struggled to his feet. In his ragged brown coat and pants, with his shapeless boots that were big enough to bathe a dog in, he appeared a seedy-looking prophet indeed. But his head was flung back and his eyes burned down on this miserable sinner who was Jasper Peacock.

"I am saying," he intoned, "that Father Amos and his people have taken refuge on an island seventy-five miles below here, where they are hiding without food or shelter. I helped them to escape. Until I find a boat captain with the courage to help me take them off that island to the safety of a northern town, I shall continue on up this river."

Jasper Peacock flung open the door and stood by it. "Proud to have made your acquaintance, Parse. But this here is a Confederate boat."

Todd Macon, clapping the purpling parson on the shoulder, grinned. "Only his half, Parson. I'm half owner of the *Natchez*, and me and the larboard side are dragging our smoke north in about two toots of the come-ahead whistle. You look like a husky 'un. Maybe the two of us can lash this hydrophobia river-rat to a spile until we get where we're goin'."

With a backward reach, Jasper Peacock took a quart bottle of his favorite patent medicine from the shelf at his back. Brandishing it like a club, he matched the younger man's grin with a wicked flash of teeth under oakum mustaches.

"Have at 'er, gents! The second battle of the war is going to be fit right here!"

CHAPTER TWO

Rebel Guns

JULIE was down the wall and beside her father, a fire-ax in her hands. In horror, Hogg raised his heavy staff.

"Peace! Peace!" he said, not looking at Todd. "Young man, I believe I can reason with your partner, if you will leave us alone for five minutes."

Todd's brown eyes were on Jasper as he rolled his sleeves back from lean, hard forearms. "Man's got to have a brain 'fore you can reason with him."

Swinging his staff horizontally with

some force, Parson Hogg stopped Todd's advance by thumping it heavily across his chest. This time the heat of those courage-shrivelling, hell-lighted eyes was for Todd.

"I asked you to leave, pilot!"

Todd's anger melted as he looked into them, and he felt like a small boy being chastised. For a moment, resentment boiled through him. Then he touched the brim of his cap with two fingers. "Good luck, Parse," he said slowly.

Walking up and down the tarred hurricane deck, he rolled and reduced to ashes two cigarettes. It was early June, and the damp night air held a bone-penetrating chill. There was a finger of ice in Todd's heart, too, that made his long face seem even longer.

They'd tripped up and down this old river for six years, he and Jasper and Julie. Every hazard river folks can meet, they had worried through together. Black, blizzard-torn nights when the head of the *Natchez* was a solid chunk of ice and a man had to crawl on all fours to reach the texas. Flood times, when the river was mined with hidden snags. Fog, wind, and darkness—the three horsemen of the boatman's Apocalypse. For all his cantankerousness, Jasper was a man to stand a trick with. And Julie. . . .

They'd never talked about love; wouldn't have known how to start. She was too independent to invite such talk. To Todd's tongue the words didn't come anyhow. Well, maybe it wasn't actually love. He respected her judgment where river things were concerned. Had to admit, grudgingly, that she was almost as good a pilot as he was. That she could stow a trip of freight so the boat didn't haul her paddles out of water and spin 'em dry. Still, he had this same respect for Jasper. He guessed the difference was that he'd never wanted to kiss Jasper.

Julie had never known any mother but the river. An old Negress cook on one of Jasper's earlier boats had taken care of the girl after her mother died when Julie was still a baby. But it was to the river that she owed her real education. She learned not to trust a smiling face, that hides treachery as the sun-rippled countenance of the river conceals its savage teeth. When the wind howled and the river was plowed by portentous cross-currents, Julie

sat among the cotton bales, chewing a wad of cotton and laughing at the lies the water was telling, knowing the bottom was deep and smooth. Thus she learned that the most blustering of men aren't necessarily the most dangerous.

Some of the river's tawny skin had gone into her smooth skin. She was red-haired and green-eyed, with a figure that took a man's mind off his work. Todd had had the picture of her before him on many a long night watch; he knew that if they split up now he'd see her on many lonely watches to come.



FROM time to time Todd thought he heard soft laughter from the wheelhouse. Puzzled, he would stop and cock an ear toward the glowing windows high above him. At length Parson Hogg was limned in the doorway. He clanked down the steps, his cranky artificial leg banging against the risers.

A yellow-toothed smile parted his dirty white whiskers. "If you'll speak to the engineer about some steam—"

"The old hoss didn't agree?"

"Jasper Peacock has enlisted in the army of the right. He said to tell you to stand the first trick—and to show me to the best cabin."

After he had lighted a lamp for Hogg and brought him a pitcher of water, Todd stood outside the room and scratched his head. The tattered prophet of doom had done in five minutes what he had failed

to achieve in a week. Still puzzled, Todd went down and stuck his head into the oily reek of the engine room.

"Touch 'em off, Big Sam!"

Big Sam, the engineer, jumped down off the wood rick, a lanky Negro the color of tanned cowhide. Eighteen pairs of eyes peered from under the boilers, were the rousters were keeping warm.

"Whichaway we goin', Cap?" Big Sam inquired. "Cause if it's souf, this chile's huntin' a new boat."

"We're goin' north—by way of Cow Island," Todd said. "We're on an errand for Mr. Lincoln, you might say. We'll raise the island by dawn and loaf along so's we'll pass Cincinnati tomorrow night, on the up-trip. Nobody knows how the town's going. You boys'll be all right. That's a guarantee."

When he went up again, Julie was shuttling coal into the stove. Jasper, cursing a headache, grubbed among the bottles on his medicine shelf.

"Damn a man that'll argify his pardner into a sick bed!" Peacock grumbled. "I won't be wu'th boiler-scrapin's this trip. Got one of my scalp-lifters comin' on."

He took a long pull at a favorite elixir, hiccuped, and replaced the bottle. No man on the Ohio had more rugged health than Jasper. But no man courted ill health as he did for the opportunity to grouse. Every patent medicine vendor had a sure sale in him, so long as the alcoholic content of his product was up to standard—ninety proof.

"What kind of a trick are you pulling

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on the damn old gimp?" Todd demanded.

Jasper's glance was peremptory. "Keep your tongue civil when you speak of Parse Hogg. He convinced me I had my log-book made up all wrong. But I'll take no 'I-told-you-so' talk from you."

"Don't worry," Todd said. "You won't get any. Because I've got a hunch there's a few rotten ones in this crate of eggs!"

That feeling still rode him when Big Sam signalled that the *Natchez* had her two hundred and forty pounds of blue ruin creaking in the boilers. Todd rang up and the packet backed full head into the sweep of the current. Live steam hissed into cannon-like cylinders, stubborn pistons drove into motion, and the *Natchez* moved down the river with dense white heads of steam bursting from her 'scape pipes.

There is a saying on the river that you can tell how the pilot is feeling by the way he toots his whistle. Todd fetched up a single, mournful blast of farewell. At best, it was a treacherous plank they were venturing onto. Cow Island may have laid dynamite traps to intercept boats making north. Even if they took Father Amos and his pack safely off the island, they had still the risk of a blockade at Cincinnati to anticipate on the return trip. So Todd's heart was heavy and his eyes were keened to vigilance.

Running light, the packet's threshing wheels shoved her along in jig-time. It was a dark night, the river like an oiled road plying between crowding, green-black banks. Todd had for a guide only his pilot's memory and an occasional streak of light across the river.

They put a dozen little towns behind them, the lights growing fewer at each passing. Down in the Texas Todd could hear Hogg's full-lunged voice rolling out a hymn. Another voice was audible when the preacher paused for breath.

"Damn old hypocrite!" Todd's lips mouthed the words. Jasper Peacock was singing psalms as though he was at a camp meeting. He hadn't, Todd thought cynically, had a pious thought in his life.

Later, Jasper came up and stood a two-hour trick. It was four o'clock when Todd returned to the pilot's bench. They passed an old barn crumbling on the river's bank. By that he knew they were nearing the town of Cow Island.

As the town came indistinctly out of the sycamores and cottonwoods growing to the water's edge, Todd reached for the speaking tube. "Slow bell, Big Sam," he called down. "Keep a head o' steam but let the wheels drag."

He went to the starboard bank and they drifted silently. The *Natchez* was just abreast of the wharf when, like lightning jagging through a black sky, gun-flame smashed across the water.



TODD'S head and shoulders were showered with glass. He felt blood streaming from a cut on his cheek. As he heard the thunder of the rifles, other guns stippled the wharf darkness with scarlet blotches. Sweat was suddenly on his face and palms. He was no coward, but he knew real fear. These riflemen were gunning for the pilot. He had the sense to duck, yanking the bell-pull as he sank.

Balled lead whined through the cabin, smashing through the glass and wood. Something thunked against his head and rolled across the floor. He saw that it was one of the wheel spokes.

Before another salvo could come, he rose to the wheel. His bellow would have carried to the engine room without the use of the speaking tube he put to his lips. "Double gong on both sides! Throw in the fireman!"

The packet shook like a dog leaving the water. Her windows rattled and the fractious wheel tried to throw Todd across the room. He kicked the bench out of the way and stood spread-eagled on his long legs as the paddles geysered water higher than the jackstaff.

On the companionway there was a sound as of old iron being dragged up the steps. Parson Hogg staggered inside. "Pilot! Pilot! Where inarnation are you?"

There was enough light in the wheel-house to paint Hogg's reflection on the window in front of Todd Macon. What the lanky pilot saw was Parson Hogg aiming an old Dragoon pistol at his back. Hogg knew well enough where he was. Instantly he was sprawling out of the way, grabbing at the Colt shoved under his belt.

Hogg either could not see the gun in his fist, or pretended not to. He lowered his own pistol and came forward. "The Lord be praised!" he said. "I was afraid they'd shot you. To the wheel, man!"

He turned, with that, and emptied his gun in the direction of the wharf. The grip of doubt was still upon Todd. Julie came into the wheelhouse, then, and he turned back to the wheel.

Powder was still being burned back in the town, but distance was now between boat and rifles like a protective wall. Julie's fingers touched Todd's bloody cheek. "Todd! You—you're hit!"

Todd raised his shoulder and wiped at the blood. "Just a glass cut. Where's Jasper?"

"Coming up. He was down on the guard when it happened."

"Tell him to stay there," Macon said quickly. "We'll be at Cow Island in ten minutes. Have the landing booms swung out."

Cow Island came at them out of the grayness of early dawn, a low, tree-jumbled piece of land cut off from the mainland by a channel hardly wider than the steamboat itself. There was a natural landing-spot at the lower end of the island. Todd ran below it, shipped up to starboard and held her steady while the roustabouts choked a stump with heavy lines.

Landing stages were run out to span the strip of water between boat and bank. Out of the leaden mist of dawn a swarm of men rushed from the trees to secure the gang-planks. Laden with boxes and bundles, they poured onto the *Natches*: It was as Todd Macon turned to go below that Parson Hogg loomed out of the shadows to put a gun-barrel in his stomach.

"Now, then, my fine young Union fool!" Hogg bored the gun deep, his mouth smiling savagely. "Your part of the job is over. Just take a deep breath, raise your hands, and don't get funny."

CHAPTER THREE

Steam for Father Amos

TENSION ran down through Todd's lean muscles. "Hogg, you psalm-singin' river-scum, what's your game?"

"Questions and answers will come later," Hogg rapped. "You'll find out all you want to know before we trip out at New Orleans. For the present you'll do as you're told."

It was vividly etched on Todd's mind how he had been duped. Hogg had played him for a fool—made him a party to the theft of his own boat! And Jasper and Julie had been part of the game, laughing behind his back all the way down the river. They had known from the start that they were not bound for Pittsburgh. Hogg was a rebel!

With that stab of despair came a twist of fury that jarred Todd into action. His left hand knocked the gun aside; his right he drove heavily for the rebel's head. With Hogg stumbling back, cursing in his beard, Todd dragged his gun. But the gunsight hung on his belt, and before he could free it that adaptable cherrywood staff of the parson's smashed against the side of his head. The lamps were snuffed out in Todd's brain. He fell to the floor beneath his wheel like a shot beef. . . .

The pilot house was filled with amber light when he came to. Gentle fingers were stroking his brow. His eyes opened and he saw Julie sitting on the floor beside him, rubbing ointment on his forehead. Two little pinches of concern were between her eyes. She smiled when she saw he was awake.

"Better?" the girl asked. "Pop said this Wahoo Root Extract would fix you up."

Todd sat up with a snarl. His open palm smashed the bottle of medicine from her hand. Staggering to his feet, he went forward. What he saw down on the boiler deck made his lips crease hard.

Father Amos and his "pathetic little band" didn't look so pathetic in daylight. They were bringing the last of the boxes aboard. A lank-haired, mongrel litter of unwashed renegades, most of them were in greasy buckskins with coonskin caps or battered old felts askew on their heads. Others wore the remnants of fine clothing stolen from steamer passengers. All were daubed from head to foot with black mud. They cursed and shouted and drank potato whiskey from earthen jugs as they worked.

Father Amos, mounted on a barrel, bel-lowed orders. He was a stunted, gorilla-limbed man with an abused stove-pipe hat on his head, a long rifle in his hands, and knee-length tassel boots caked with mud.

The pirates' luggage was boxed in long, flat cases and stubby kegs. The contents of these boxes was not hard to guess.

Todd could hear the howling and moaning of the rousters. They had been cooped up under the boilers, where a dozen guards were seeing that they stayed. The white members of the crew stood back at the fringe of the trees on the island.

Todd confronted Julie with eyes as hard as brown crockery. "Who are they—Hogg and his whiskey-logged Father Amos?"

Julie's features showed resentment. "They're from the Big Muddy . . . packet men like us. Father Amos is really Amos Bullard. When they heard the war had started, they jumped a supply boat going to Fort Benton, in Montana, and took off all the powder and guns. But their boat ran through herself just above St. Louis and they had to carry their cargo overland, in hopes of finding a friendly boat owner.

"And they found one!" Macon rapped. "A man who jumped at the chance to sell his pardner down the river. You know where I'm bound, don't you? To some prison where I'll rot till the war's over!"

Julie shook her red head. "Hogg promised to let you off at Cairo. He'd let you go now, only you'd pass the word and we'd be intercepted." Suddenly she took his hands. "Todd, why not come over to our side? You're only making it hard for yourself—and for me."

"I'll throw in with finks when the river starts running uphill. Amos Bullard . . . I know that name. The job don't come that's too dirty for him. He'll pirate a cargo if he can't get it otherwise. You've turned the *Natchez* into a pirate ship as sure as though there was a black flag on the jack-staff."

Julie made no answer, for just then Hogg, Bullard and Jasper Peacock came up the steps and into the wheelhouse. Winking, Bullard touched his fingers to the brim of his stovepipe in Julie's direction. Julie's cheeks reddened. Bullard threw the window open and bawled down

at the sweating men on the foredeck. "Haul in that gangway! Let go them lines!"

Jasper's grin was sheepish, but he was not unmindful of his superior position. "Sorry we had to hang one on you," he said to Todd. "Just remember we don't tolerate mutiny, and you'll get along all right. We're givin' you the run of the boat, but don't abuse the privilege by hidin' a wrench or slucin' bar down your pants leg."

The packet backed into the tug of the river, with Bullard at the wheel. Todd headed for the door, but paused to ask Parson Hogg a question. "Where are we bound?"

Hogg, letting himself onto a bench, had to bludgeon his artificial leg into submission. "We meet the *Red River* about half way to Cairo. Heard of her? I don't reckon you have! Nor seen the likes. Boiler plate walls to her wheelhouse. Cannon mounted fore and aft. Built heavy for ramming. The *Red River* is the first of a fleet that's a-buildin'. We'll transfer our cargo to her late this afternoon. At Cairo she goes south while we 'scape up the Missouri to the Dakotas. There's gold boats comin' down from Salmon Creek, in Montana." His crooked grin showed. "I figger we'll pay for our fuel."



PARSON HOGG'S wild crew took over the packet from bullrails to Texas. All the white members had been marooned on Cow Island. The Negro roustabouts would be auctioned off in New Orleans, but for the time being they were kept penned up under the boilers. Big Sam, being the only man aboard who understood a cross-compound engine, was still at his post. Hogg tapped a keg of whiskey and set it on the boiler deck, with a dipper beside it with which the renegades helped themselves whenever they chanced to pass—which was often.

After his initial fury passed, Todd Macon became conscious of one thing. That Amos Bullard was the wildest-eyed pilot who ever mistook a sandbar for a wind reef. Sitting on a packing box before the forecastle, Todd watched him bear down to within fifty feet of dangerous stumps

and snags before putting her over and gliding by them. There was no slow-bell with Bullard: it was double-gong from the time he took over.

Hurrying down the sun-shot river, the *Natchez* foamed across the shoals where Todd knew the lead would not have drawn more than quarter-less-one. The dense stands of green trees on the banks went by with the speed of a revolving wheel's rim. Every few minutes heard the hills toss back the jangle of a bell as Amos Bullard demanded more steam from the laboring firemen and engineer.

Then there came a time when the groaning steam drums had all they could hold. Bullard's demands for steam were unavailing. Todd saw him stick his head through the window and shout, "Hogg! Git up here and take over. I'll show that double-riveted engineer I ain't foolin' when I ask for steam."

Todd was on the main deck guard when the squat, gorilla-like pilot came down the stairs into the hot fumes of the engine room. He stood there, watching Big Sam and a striker shovel coal into an already cherry-red furnace. One hair-padded hand swung a knotted rope against his tasseled boot. His stovepipe was on the back of his head.

"You, boy! You the engineer on this scow?"

Big Sam's pigskin-colored face was muddy with coal dust and sweat. He leaned on the sluicing bar, eyes big with fear. "Yossuh. That's me!"

"Heard me ringing for steam, ain't you?"

"Givin' you all I got, Boss. We car-ryin' forty pounds over what we 'lowed right now."

Bullard began to swing the hempen cudgel in a circle at his side. "You ain't by any chance trying to hold us back till it's too late to git past Cairo?" His big mouth was ugly.

"No, suh!" Big Sam pointed at the arm of the escape valve. "I got that weight right out to the blue ruin notch."

Without warning, the rope broke its smooth orbit to slam into the side of the Negro's head. Big Sam threw up an arm, a blue bruise showing where the big, water-soaked knot had struck his cheek-bone.

Bullard was shouting, "You lyin' ape! You ain't never heard of hookin' a keg of whiskey onto the escape arm, have you? You'd a had 'er on there two hours ago if we were headin' upstream instead o' down. Maybe you'll remember some of them little tricks—after—this!"

The final words were punctuated with savage swings of the rope. Big Sam was knocked off his feet by the staggering force of the knot. He cowered there while Bullard laid stripe after stripe across his bare back.

Todd stood it as long as he could. Then he vaulted the guard-rail and went toward the pilot.

Bullard sensed his presence and halted in mid-swing to confront him. He dropped the rope, eyes narrowing, and pulled a cap-and-ball Navy pistol from the holster at his thigh. His words seemed to pry through his teeth.

"All right, Yank! I got another kind of medicine for you!"

Todd stopped, because it was either that or suicide. Bullard snorted. Picking up the rope, he fashioned a slip knot in the end of it. His eyes still on Todd, he

NO FINER DRINK ON SHIP OR SHORE



Purity...in the big big bottle — that's Pepsi-Cola!



made a loop about a small barrel of resin and hung it on the arm of the hissing safety valve. Immediately the jet of steam was cut off, and the steam drum began to creak.

"Where we're goin', we're goin' fast," was his final warning. "Leave your throttles wide open and she'll burn up that steam. Try to cut down on me and you'll be the first to get scalded to death."

When he had gone, Todd helped Big Sam to his feet and threw a bucket of water over him. "I could cuss myself for gettin' you into this, Big Sam," he told him. "But they've tricked me as much as you. You're headed for that cotton field again; I'm on my way to the bastion at N'y Orleans. At least—" he lowered his voice, glancing around. "—at least that's what they think. We've got till we pass Cairo to show 'em different. You boys keep on your toes. I've got a plan comin' up."

There was hope in the Negro's eyes, but as he went forward Todd hadn't the faintest idea what he intended to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

Father Amos Talks of Love

AT NOON Jasper Peacock sought Todd where he stood on the boiler deck, watching the blunt prow of the *Natches* pry the brown water apart. Todd looked at the thing he held in his hand. It was a tin rouser pan filled with food. His eyes raised questioningly to his former partner's face.

Jasper's stubbled cheeks reddened. "Hogg sent me down with it. He says no—no Yankees will eat in the saloon after this."

Todd took the tin pan and spun it into the river. Leaning on his elbows, he watched the tumbling bow-waves plow over it.

Jasper stiffened. "You'll wish you'd et that, by tonight!" His tone lacked sincerity, for he knew as well as Todd that Hogg's insult could not have been more degrading.

When the younger man still said nothing, Jasper fumbled, "See here, Todd, they ain't as bad 'as all that. They—they're rough-livin' men, all right. I don't

quite understand Hogg myself, yet. But him and me see eye to eye on this state's rights business."

"Do you see eye-to-eye with Bullard on how to handle your crew?"

Jasper scratched the back of his neck. "That was a leetle raw. But the feller's been drinkin' all morning. Give him an inch."

"Makes a lightnin' pilot, don't he?" Todd was pounding a wedge into that tiny crack of doubt that showed on Jasper's face. "We lost five paddles back there at Brewster Shoal when he let her smell the bar. It's just a question of time until the boat either runs through herself or blows a boiler."

"I reckon," Jasper Peacock ventured, "I'll be takin' over before—"

Both men sprang back as a bottle crashed onto the deck and shattered into a mess of glass and liquid. The label lay in plain sight:

DR. FRANKLIN'S WAHOO ROOT EXTRACT

Jasper's eyes bugged as though on stems. Before he could utter a word, two more bottles smashed themselves to pieces on the deck. One gaudy label was visible like a sodden epitaph:

PLUNKETT'S FAMOUS ANTI-COLIC FORMULA

Todd was suddenly grinning. Plunkett's was Jasper's favorite of favorites. He waited for the old pilot's response, and it came in the voice of a bull buffalo.

"Hogg! What in the name of hell do you think you're doin'?"

Parson Hogg's massive head and shoulders showed in the glassless window. "Cleaning out some of this corruption," he called down. "This shelf's got to come out before we can line the cabin with boiler plate."

Again the sky was raining elixir. Jasper, taking shelter against the wall of the texas, stuck his head out and bawled, "Keep your hands off them bottles!"

A whole armful of vials soared toward the deck, now, and the old pilot, his eyes like holes burned in a blanket, watched them smash and slither across the planks and through the bullrails. When it was

finished, he wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Damn him! I'll be dead o' the miseries before mornin'!"



THE sun caught up with the boat and passed it, sliding down the river to glare into the pilot's eyes. Jasper never got his chance at the wheel. Hogg took over after Bullard went off, and as sunset brought a cool breeze down the valley it was obvious that Jasper Peacock's station was not much higher than that of Todd.

There was a vibrancy in the atmosphere, now. Parson Hogg had passed word that he expected to make connections with the *Red River* any hour. Some of his men stationed themselves on the foredeck, ready to swing out the landing booms and be ready to transfer the munitions on a moment's notice.

Todd had eaten a bait of dinner in the cook-shack and was heading forward when he heard the muffled cry aft. Apprehension ran a stiffness down his spine.

Julie!

Turning, he sprinted down the deck. In the shadowy corner formed by the fantail and the wall of the deck house he picked out the struggling shape of two figures. In the gloom, Amos Bullard looked more than ever like a gorilla in man's clothing, his long arms trying to lock Julie against him, one hand over her mouth.

Todd's left hand pivoted him, while his right traveled a long two feet to smash on Bullard's nose. The renegade staggered back until the fantail banged against his head. Closing in, Todd drove again for his face. But Bullard's brain was protected by a thick skull; the stunning effect of the first blow sloughed away with one shake of his bullet head. He ducked Todd's fists and closed with him. Only the wooden rail kept them from falling fifteen feet to the main deck as they went down in a threshing tangle. Fists chopped, thumbs gouged, knees jack-knifed into groins. It was a boatman's fight—no holds barred, and the devil take the hindmost.

Julie was in it too, kicking at Bullard

and hitting Todd just as often. The renegade's fists bludgeoned into Todd's chest and stomach with staggering force. One of his eyes was closing, where Bullard's head had butted him. Bullard was after his throat now, with hands that seemed to have steel claws for fingers.

And he made the hold good. Twice he banged Todd's head on the planking, thumbs searching for his windpipe, before the pilot could roll over on top of him. The pain caused by those spatulate fingers wedging into his throat would have brought a scream, but not a breath of air could go into his lungs or out. He felt his face choking with blood. His tongue flopped up and down spasmodically.

Bullard's face was close to his. The fleshy lips were drawn back from set teeth, the flat nose was wrinkled. His eyes were like hot clinkers. Todd knew, with a wrench of desperation, that he had only a few seconds to break loose. After that it would be Bullard's to strangle or release him.

With all the force his body possessed, he hurled himself to the left, bringing his right hand up under Bullard's tucked-in chin. The force of the punch was not great enough to hurt him, but Todd jammed his thumb up into the soft skin close to the windpipe. His fingernail tore the flesh as the finger probed deep into the nerve cluster. Bullard grunted with pain and his hands came away from Todd's throat.

Todd reeled against the wall and got to his feet. Bullard was slower in rising, and he left his chin unguarded as he came up. Into that unprotected spot Todd Maccon slung a blow that had all his back and shoulder muscles behind it. There was a sound like a butcher cracking a joint with a cleaver.

Amos Bullard was thrown back. The railing caught him at the waist. One full-lunged scream left his throat as his stubby body jack-knifed over. A cold hand was in Todd's vitals as he watched him fall, twisting, to crash onto the guard fifteen feet below and sprawl into the dark river.

Far back, Bullard came up and yelled again, through a throat choked with water. Hogg's voice answered him from the wheelhouse. "Bullard! Where are you?"

The drowning man's voice was fading,

as though borne away on the tide of the river. "—water! Macon—shoved—"

Todd felt, rather than heard, the thud of something striking the paddle wheels. It was a whisper of sound that traveled forward through bulkheads and planking, chilling the blood of every man who had heard a man's back broken by a steamboat's paddles. Afterward there were no more cries from Amos Bullard. . . .

It kept Todd standing there with a stomach tightly bunched like a fist. Above, Hogg could be heard yelling for a man to take the wheel. Suddenly Todd heard Julie's voice; a small scared voice.

"Oh, Todd! Todd! What have we got in for?"

"You mean what have I got in for! Hogg knows I killed Bullard. He'll be fixin' to swing me from a loading boom when he finds me."

"We're all in this together, you and I and Pop." Julie's eyes filmed with quick tears. "Pop and I were fools. We were so wrapped up in this state's rights business we couldn't see the end of it. Good men like Big Sam being overlorded by curs like Bullard. None of us has ever owned a slave in his life, and we wouldn't want to. But we forgot that we were taking all those poor free men back to slavery. And besides—I don't think Hogg ever intended to give the boat back to us. I think he's commandeered it for his own selfish purposes. He's thinking about what he can sell those guns for, not just the good of the Confederacy. I think even Pop realizes it now."

Todd could hear Parson Hogg clattering along the hurricane deck toward the companionway that came out within twenty feet of them. Bitterness darkened his eyes. "It's something to hear you say that, anyway. But it's too late to think of changing things now. We'll raise the *Red River* in a few minutes. After that, you and Jasper are bound up the Missouri—until Hogg tears the bottom of the boat out on a bar somewhere. And me—" He glanced sharply through the gloom, as Hogg's staff thumped on the top step. "That's my cue to go to the bank pronto!"

Julie gripped his arm. "What will you do?"

"Maybe swim ashore. Anyway, I'm getting out of here." He had swung over

the rail and was poised by the toes of his boots on the edge of the decking. "Remember me to Jasper, the old hoss, if I don't see him again. So long, Julie!"

He dropped out of her sight into the gloom. She stifled a scream. An instant later the *Natchez* heard him strike the guard of the main deck, yell, and thresh briefly in the water. Then no more was heard of Todd Macon.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Riverman Makes War

THE chill of the river went into Todd's marrow. Clinging to the slippery guard planks near the stern, he shivered as he dragged himself aboard. The twelve-foot drop to the guard had numbed his legs to the hips. He had been lucky to get a hand-hold on the carlings after he deliberately let himself splash into the river. Up above, he heard them shouting back and forth.

"He's rivered!" That was Hogg's cannon-like voice. "Lay me a light at the bull rail! I'll pump him so full of lead—"

"Yonder he goes!" a man shouted. "He's makin' for shore."

A gun crashed three times, and across the water a log rocked like a sluggish alligator. Other guns came into the fracas, so that the water from the bullrails to a point fifty feet away boiled with lead plunking harmlessly into sand-shadows and bits of flotsam. The heavy dusk turned every mark on the river into a possible fugitive.

Renegades swarmed aft, to keen the darkness for the swimmer. But Todd was scuttling up the deck and ducking hastily into the engine room. Big Sam stood blank-faced, ash hoe in his hands, as he came inside and leaned back against the wall by the door.

"Marse Todd?" he quavered.

"It ain't a zombie," Todd assured him. "Where can a man hide in here, Big Sam, if they take a notion to search the boat?"

Big Sam's brown face cracked into a grin. "Sho 'nuff, it's you! Y'all rivered that Mist' Bullard?"

"For good. But you can have the satisfaction of knowing that it was your engines that turned the paddles that broke

his back. I reckon he had enough steam this time."

"I don't heah 'im ringin' fo' mo'!"

Haste prodded Todd from the door. "You won't hear me, either, if you don't hide me some place. They'll be down here, directly."

Sam's white eyeballs rocked up. He was peering among the pipes and carlings of the ceiling, above clanking, sweating, black machinery. "If'n a man was right spry, and didn't set on no steam pipes," he frowned, "he could tuck hi'self in yonder. Dah's a big hole in the bulkhead that the pipes go th'ough. Y'all might so could tuck in dah."

Todd was already swinging up by a cool pipe. His hands sought gingerly among the network of big and little pipes for the ones that carried live and escape steam to and from the drums. Finding two he could safely crawl on, he backed into the small space Big Sam had indicated. In there, the darkness was complete. The engineer chuckled.

"You done disappeared all right!" Abruptly, he grabbed up the hoe again and began raking his fire. "Hush yo' mouf!" he hissed. "Somebody comin'!"

Todd could see Parson Hogg and the three other men as they came through the door and stood with bared guns in the red glow of the open furnace. Hogg's eyes caught the flames and his teeth flashed.

"Boy, you see him crawl aboard?"

Big Sam's head shook. "I heered you shootin' at him. He nevah crawled back on this boat."

One of the men said, "He's lyin'. Look at him shake."

"No, suh! Y'all can look aroun'. Don't see him, do you?"

Walking back, Hogg glanced into the coal bin and resin barrel. Then his eyes traveled up and along the carlings. "Garth," he said, "look at that. Ain't

that a man's hand on that damn pipe there?"

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IN TODD'S veins, needle ice formed. It was too late, now, to pull his hand back into the shadow. He saw the parson's gun come up. His mind worked like a trapped rat frantically seeking a hole through which to escape. But there was no way out. He was on the point of diving headlong onto the renegade when the boat's whistle blasted. A bell rang and Big Sam jumped for the reverse cam. Hogg glanced about. Todd's hand yanked into the darkness.

"The *Red River*!" Hogg snapped. Peering again at Todd, he cocked his head on the side. "Don't see it now. I reckon I was wrong. Time enough to make sure later."

The boat's sudden slowing threw him onto his bad leg, so that for a moment he was wrestling with it and cursing. He finished by pouching his gun and gripping his upright staff with both hands. The others were impatient to be out.

"Not so fast!" Hogg said. "You know what you're to do, now?"

"Run out the heel and make fast. Then transfer the guns and ammunition."

"After you collect for them, fool! Remember that, if you forget everything else. If the South can't pay, we'll ransom them back to the North. I'll be at the wheel with a rifle in my hands, in case they try to outfox us."

As they went out, one of the renegades remarked, "That'll be a lot of help ag'in two cannons on the head!"

With the sound of their footfalls on the boiler deck, Todd swung down. "That was narrow," he said slowly. "Listen, Sam. You wanted a chance to go back to Pittsburgh. Are you willing to fight

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for it? Wrenches and crowbars against guns?"

Big Sam raised the ash hoe with both hands. "I sooner go down choppin' on Hogg's head with this, as live to chop cotton with it."

"All right," the pilot said. "Soon as you make connections with the warboat, run back and bring the rest of your boys forward. They won't likely set a guard on 'em. If they do, you've still got your hoe. I'll need you right here, but tell the rest of them this. . . ."

Big Sam listened, and his mouth widened into a grin. "I'll tell 'em!" he finally said. "But y'all step mighty easy up yonder, Marse Todd."

Todd took a sluicing bar from the engine room. He made it safely to the boiler deck. There he watched the renegades lower the gangplank from the now stationary *Natchez* to the head of the *Red River*, whose paddles were turning just enough to keep her bow-to-bow with the other boat. The warboat was a squat stern-wheeler with boiler-plate lined decks to shelter riflemen. Behind the shields, Todd made out lines of armed men. A couple of small brass cannon were bolted to the foredecks.

One of Parson Hogg's lieutenants crossed to the *Red River* and spoke with the captain. There seemed to be heated words, but in the end the pirate returned to the packet with a small iron box under his arm. Soon thereafter, the transfer of cargo commenced.

The realization of how great were the odds he was bucking bore suddenly upon Todd Macon. His army was a little handful of free Negroes; the other side, heavily armed, outnumbered them four to one. Courage and desperation might outbalance the number odds. But what would balance the cannons?

Through the shadowy deserted upper decks he made his way to the texas. Inside, he ran to the companionway and mounted to the hurricane deck. Coming out on the bare stretch of tarred roof, he was wary. Hogg was in a position to see him if he should glance around. But Todd reached the wall of the lofty wheelhouse unobserved.

He was just rounding the corner of it when he saw another form sliding toward

the steps which were Todd's own goal. In the same instant, the man saw him. It was too late to backtrack. Though the man had a gun, Todd hurled himself upon him, iron bar upraised.

Jass Peacock's voice, hoarse with alarm, barked, "Todd, you damned fool!"



TODD stopped with a jerk, but the bar remained aloft. "I don't know where you stand now, Jasper," he panted, "but I ain't taking chances. Put that gun down or I'll part your scalp."

The old pilot lowered his revolver. "Two against forty, and you've got to make war with your own pardner!" he remarked. "I'm going up there and take over. I've got my belly full of things as they stand."

"That's straight?" Todd asked him.

"Watch me!"

Jasper started up the steps. With a little lift of satisfaction, Todd followed. At the top, Jasper turned the knob—and found it locked. Hogg's voice came through the panels: "Who is it?"

Todd essayed a nasal imitation of Hogg's lieutenant: "Garth! I've got the money here."

The answer was double-barreled. "Garth, hell!" the parson shouted. "That's Macon talking?" A bullet came through the door, passing with a snarl between Todd and Jasper.

With a shove, Todd put Jasper aside and lunged for the lock with a swing of the bar. It splintered, the door banged wide open, and Todd went through a-sprawl. Parson Hogg stood with his back to the wheel, his whiskered face distorted, the gun in his hand spewing flame. His first shot passed three feet above the falling man; his second whipped at Todd's hair.

But Jasper Peacock's first bullet, aimed from the darkness, caved through the parson's stout chest to tear at his heart. He went back against the wheel. Once more he fired, this time through the floor between his feet. His good leg failed him, but that cantankerous artificial limb of his, even in death, refused to bend. It kept him erect as a plank until he toppled forward on his face.

Todd Macon vaulted over to take the wheel. In a swift glance, he saw how things stood on the foredeck. All of the parson's men were back-and-bellying the gun cases across the gangplanks. But some of them were staring up at the pilot house, surprised by the sound of gunfire.

Todd blew two long blasts of the whistle. There was, for a moment, no result. Then the darkness gave up the forms of eighteen roustabouts. At the same instant, the *Natchez* gave a forward thrust that caused both ways to bow upward and snap in the middle. Men and boxes were flung high. Some, falling between the two boats, were crushed as the bows jammed heavily together.

The tumult was complete when the rousters, swinging every weapon the engine room afforded, rushed the renegades. Big Sam now had his wheels in reverse. The widening strip of water between the boats was filled with threshing men. So sudden and so vicious was the attack that the Negroes had swept the deck almost clean of pirates in ten seconds, caving in skulls and crowding their enemies into the water before more than a dozen guns had barked.

Steam was roaring from the *Natchez*'s escape pipes. Full head she backed for a hundred feet, then shipped up to larboard. The fight on deck was over. Todd watched the men hunt shelter as the *Red River's* decks ran bright with gunflame. He put the wheel hard over. Big Sam anticipated his every order. The packet trembled and moved upstream even as Todd reached for the come-ahead bell.

Jasper was looking back. "Hold down your hair!" he gasped. "They're fixin' to fire the cannons!"

Todd groaned. "What's holdin' those boys below! I told them—"

A great lurch of the floor stopped his tongue. Simultaneously there was a splintering crash to starboard. The roar of a cannon mixed with the noise of a smoke-stack tearing free of its guys to crash on the hurricane deck and tumble into the water in a geyser of steam.

Flame spouted from the stub of the iron stack, close beside the wheelhouse. The short hairs of Todd's neck lifted stiffly. The next shot would be true. They were gunning for the wheelhouse. Then

Jasper, standing at the rear windows, grunted in surprise.

"What in tarnation! One of them roustabouts is driftin' back to the *Red River* in a dinghy! What in hell is this all about?"

Todd dropped the tie-down over a spoke and went back. He looked down at the small rowboat drifting under the very bullrails of the pursuer. "That's no roustabout," he said. "It's a boat-full of powder-kegs. We didn't have any cannon, so I took a chance that Big Sam could figger his fuse just about right—"

It was evident that the engineer had. Drifting close to the Southerner, the dinghy attracted the attention of a rebel who tried to capsize it with a boat hook. As though his touching the boat had been a signal, three kegs of powder went off with a terrific explosion.

The force of it caved in the remaining windows of the pilot house. It seemed to Todd that hell itself had erupted. A vast fountain of fire mounted to the black night sky. On the crest of it rode a great chunk of the *Red River's* forecastle. A round, bowl-like depression appeared in the river where the dinghy had been. It must have measured fifty feet across, and the bottom of it touched the sandy bed of the river. Into this bowl huge fragments of the steamboat tumbled like scantlings dumped from a wagon into a hole. There were six more rapid explosions as the warboat's boilers exploded.

Starkly illuminated for a moment by the fire, the bodies of two-score men could be seen to soar upward. Twisting, sprawling, they disappeared into the darkness. A moment later the flames died out, save for the burning hulk of the *Red River*—a boat badly damaged. Todd Macon, with a sick feeling in his stomach, went back to the wheel and picked up the speaking tube.

"All right, Big Sam. Let's have some steam," he shouted. "We're homeward bound."



THE *Natchez* limped into New Albany shortly after dawn. Here they would spend a week or two seeing the packet put back in shape. After that

—Todd and Julie stood on the hurricane deck as Jasper warped her in, thinking a lot about the future and not talking much.

"Did Pop have anything to say to you?" Julie asked.

"He ain't opened his mouth since we got away from the *Red River*, except to grouse about having the miseries in his back."

Julie smiled. "You know what I think really turned him against Hogg? Seeing his medicine shelf broken up! Even Bullard trying to get fresh with me might not have turned the trick. But he had to have his booze."

Todd's eyes were speculative as he frowned down at the brown water. "Jasper's going to have the miseries proper when he finds out what I aim to do today."

"What's that?" There was a lot of tension in the girl's voice.

"I'm putting in a salvage claim for his half of the boat. I was more or less responsible for bringing her back in as good shape as she is. And he's not getting off

scot-free after trying to do me out of my half."

Julie's eyes, sober but puzzled, searched his face. "I—I don't blame you, Todd. But I can't believe you'd really do a thing like that."

"Then you're in for a surprise. Unless Jasper is willing to make a deal with me, I'll insist on a transfer of title into my name. I'll teach that old rounder to make a fool out of me!"

"What kind of a deal?" Julie asked guardedly. Her eyes were wide in her beautiful face.

Todd's arm went around her and he pulled her back from the old pilot's view. "Another transfer of title. Julie Peacock's coming over to the Macon line for good. Will you talk up the idea to your old man?"

Julie's arms slipped up to pull his face down to hers. "I guess I'll have to, Todd. You're still first officer, and I've been on the river too long to think of mutiny. Especially when I like the kind of orders I'm getting! Let's go and see what Pop has to say."

THE END



"THE REAL QUILL!"

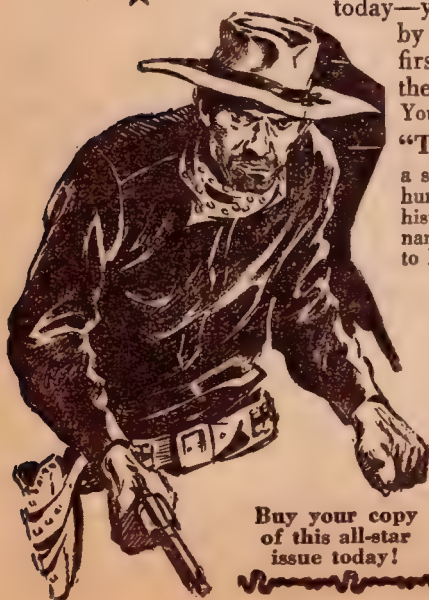
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Tad said evenly,
"Let's get it over
with. Take care of
yourself, Gault!"

BOOMER'S BRAT

By L. L. FOREMAN

How could a lonely button face the gentle, beautiful schoolmarm who had given his cold, hungry and unwanted little carcass shelter and kindness—when his loud mouth had sent her cowboy lover out to die before a frame-up saloon-man's gun?

HIS name was Burro Sanders. He was a boomer's kid, the son of a drunken failure who had drifted into the country and met an alcoholic end down in the shack settlement. The boomers—free-land seekers and homesteaders

—had located their claims along the river bottomlands, defying the cattle tradition of the country and the slow anger of the cattlemen. The cowmen had their own town of Cibola, and on Saturday nights the boomers steered clear of it.

Burro lay in bed, wide awake long after he should have been asleep. The murmur of voices downstairs made him restless, but he was careful not to rumple the bed-sheets. White bedsheets, smooth and clean to the touch, still awed him. An unwashed blanket and a ragged old coat had been his bed until he'd entered the house of Mary Morissey, who ran the new one-room school for the district.

Burro liked Miss Mary. He couldn't help it. She had taken him in after his father had died, just as she had taken in life-battered old Chinook John, who tried to earn his keep by tending to the little house's garden.

Still, Miss Mary wasn't a man, and at a time like this she sure showed herself as a misunderstanding woman. Sometimes she looked just like a girl. In the mornings, for instance, when she whistled while getting breakfast ready, or stood gazing out through the window with her hands clasped behind her, smiling a queer, soft smile to herself.

But Burro knew her age. She'd laughed when he'd asked her, and had given him the humorously pensive look that always made him feel almost achingly warm toward her.

"I'm nearly twenty-two, Burro . . . high time somebody married me, hmm?"

"Why ain't you?" Burro had said. "Married, I mean. You're sure prettier'n all them what is. All I seen, anyhow."

"Why, thank you, Burro." She'd laughed again, her softest laugh, and pulled his hair. "I knew I wasn't making a mistake when I took you in, in spite of what everybody—" She checked herself. "That was a very nice compliment," she'd gone on. "Make it a habit. Some girl will love you for it, some day. We have to be told, you know. We're not mind readers, much as we may wish."

Miss Mary was fine. She understood how a fellow got all awkward and did the wrong things out of sheer cussedness—like the time he'd stood and swore at those starched-stiff women from Cibola, who'd come out to poke their bills into why he wasn't being sent to an orphanage.

After he'd carried on like that, they'd talked about a reformatory being the best place for him. They'd mentioned how he'd thrown a clasp knife at that big Buthroyd

boy in a fight in school, and how he came of bad stock—whatever that was. But Miss Mary had taken up for him and told them off, her color higher than he'd ever seen it, and all that softness gone from her voice.

"He's a lawless young ruffian!" one woman had said. "There's bad blood in him! You can't make a housedog out of a wolf pup. What he needs is a good, sound thrashing at the hands of some man who knows how to—"

"He's a boy," said Miss Mary. "All boys have some of the savage in them, and Burro is no different from the rest. He's never had a chance. I'm going to see that he gets one. He stays here! This is my house!"

"He and that old rapsallion, Chinook John!" put in another icily. "I declare, I don't know what things are coming to, when a young school teacher fills her house with—"

"If you wish to criticize my private affairs," Miss Mary whipped back, just as icily, "perhaps you had better do it on your way home!"

She'd pretty near lost her teaching job on account of it.



YES, Miss Mary was high-grade, all right, but she sure was way off the trace right now, trying to stop Tad Denning from going in to Cibola to gun it out with Harl Gault.

Tad Denning had dropped by on his way in, hours ago, and there he was, still downstairs, letting Miss Mary talk him out of it. Why, Tad *knew* he had to kill Gault. Tad was a cattleman, owning his own spread and brand, back up in the Gran Quivera country. He didn't get down this way as often as Burro would have liked to see him—nor as often, Burro suspected, as Miss Mary could have wished.

Harl Gault had killed Fred Denning, Tad's younger brother. There was only one thing for Tad to do now, and that was to kill Gault. Gault ran the Sandy Bob Bar in Cibola. A big, black-eyed man. Folks said he was bad. They'd said, too, that young Fred Denning was wild and ornery when drinking, and he'd run up against trouble some day.

But that made no difference. It was like old Chinook John said: when a killing was called for, you went out and met your man. Old Chinook was always telling of gunfights he'd seen here and there in his time, and he'd always end up with: "An' down he went to hell an' gone!" Somebody always got killed, in his stories. Not just hurt. Killed dead.

"In Tombstone, it was . . . at the Oriental. Buckskin Frank was tendin' bar, an' he'd had a run-in with Billy Claibourne. Feller tole Buckskin Frank that Billy was outside with a scattergun, darin' him to come out. Frank, he put down his cigar an' moseyed out the side door. 'Hey, Billy,' he said, an' Billy turned an' took Frank's bullet right 'tween his eyes. Frank went back behind the bar an' picked up his cigar, an' all he ever said was, 'He died nice.' Yessir, bub, that's the way it goes. Frank knowed he either had to kill his man, or sing mighty small. So he stepped out with his gun, an' Billy went down to hell an' gone!"

That was the way it was, and Burro thoroughly believed in it. You met your enemy, downed him in proper fashion, and kept your self-respect and standing among men. That is, you did this if you were a cowman. Homesteaders, somehow, were built different, and didn't even carry guns. Burro was not proud of being classed as a boomer's kid. He felt that he would have made a much better hand as the riding son of a cattleman, seeing he was so in accord with cattlemen's ways.

So he condemned Miss Mary for what she was trying to do, and waited impatiently to hear Tad Denning leave the house on his way to Cibola and a showdown with Gault. He didn't like Gault. The saloon man had pestered Miss Mary, last time she was in town. Burro, with her at the time, had seen Gault stop her on the street, and when he got to where they stood he'd heard enough to know what was on Gault's mind.

Impatience finally got the better of Burro, and he slipped out of bed in the darkness and crept to the head of the stairs. Now he could hear the voices more clearly, could make out what was being said.

"I know he's dangerous, Mary," Tad was saying soberly, "if that's what you mean. And I know Fred was riding high.

Question is, was it a fair fight? That's what I want to find out. If it wasn't, then—"

"Then you'll do what's expected of you," Miss Mary interrupted in a queer tone. "Men are like boys. Burro would do that, too. He wouldn't stop to think that . . . that he might be breaking somebody's heart."

There was a long silence. At last Burro heard Tad speak again, and he, too, spoke in a queer tone. "Mary, I'm going to curl up in your stable. I'll see how I feel about it in the morning. Good night, Mary."

Burro went back to bed, thoroughly disgusted. Gosh, what was Tad thinking of, to let Miss Mary do that to him? Why, if he let Gault off he'd never be able to hold up his head again. When a killing was called for—and one was sure called for now—you went out and met your man.

You just had to, or sing mighty small from then on. Gault was no good, anyhow, and the killing of the likes of him was no crime at all. Miss Mary had ought to welcome it done, so's she wouldn't be pestered by Gault no more. Women were queer, all right, and she was just like all the rest in some ways. He was bitterly disappointed in her, and in Tad, too.



BREAKFAST next morning lacked the catchy whistling and easy laughter. Miss Mary got the grub ready in silence, gave Burro an oddly weary look when he got by at the pump without washing his neck, and was a little short with old Chinook John.

Burro could see that she hadn't slept much and was under a strain. The first time he had seen her, she had reminded him of the picture in the big lighted window of a church back in St. Louis.

He had been guiding his father's stumbling steps down a dark street, toward the riverside warehouse whose caretaker let them sleep in the heated basement, and he'd looked at that picture-window and thought he'd never seen anything so wonderful. The light shone through and brought out all the rich hues of the colored panes. There were two women in the picture, and he'd asked his father about them.

Jonathan Matthew Sanders was a drunken bum with a sense of humor that was irreligious, sardonic and soured. From the murky depths of that humor he had fastened the nickname of Burro onto his son, and he called him nothing else. But sometimes a fleeting hand would reach to him across the sodden years, and touch him with a heavy finger.

He had stood swaying, staring with his son at the two women in the lighted window. "Ruth and Naomi," he muttered. "Ruth's the youngest one. She said, 'Whither thou goest I will go. Thy people shall be my people . . .'" He put a hand over his bleared eyes, as if the light hurt them. "I knew a girl like that . . . like Ruth. She was beautiful. She was your mother."

Then he was ugly, and he shoved Burro away. "The hell with sleep. I think I know where I can bum another drink . . ."

The impression had remained with Burro—that Miss Mary was like that Ruth in the lighted window. But gayer, more alive. This morning, though, somehow she was more like Naomi, the older one.

Tad came in to breakfast. He'd got his horse saddled, and it stood tied to the yard fence. He wore a belt and a gun, and he was just as quiet as Miss Mary. Work and riding had hardened him and stretched him out to a tall growth, and he was like a length of well-used timber, stained dark on the surface, straight-grained, seasoned.

To see the youthfulness in him you had to look into his eyes when he was laughing. But there would be no laughing from him this morning. His problem had stamped a faint frown on his face, and the frown meant that the problem was not yet settled. Maybe he'd ride west and home to work, or maybe he'd point his horse south for Cibola and the Sandy Bob Bar.

Burro was worried about that. South to Cibola, as he saw it, was the road to honor and vengeance, no matter how Miss Mary looked at it. Tad just couldn't turn back home without going out and meeting his man; it would be a disgrace and a shame to him and the cattle country tradition. Tad was a grand, good man, and it wasn't right for Miss Mary to hold him back. Miss Mary didn't understand about

these things. Didn't understand at all.

Tad said, "Mary, I want to talk to you later on. It's about your teaching job."

Burro saw Miss Mary look up quickly from the table, that softly bright look coming back into her eyes. He saw this, but it wasn't important. What was important was the chance he saw for putting the iron code back into Tad.

"Harl Gault talked about that the other day," he blurted out rapidly. "He swore to Moses he'd get Miss Mary fired if she froze him out next time he came a-visitin' here. He said, 'You wintered me cold, but I want it summer next time.' That's what he said, an' I liked to killed him if I'd had—"



HE DIDN'T have to finish, for Tad was on his feet, his chair shoved back, his face all hard, muscle-lumpy around the mouth. Miss Mary got up, too, pale, the bright look gone from her eyes as swiftly as it had come. Old Chinook John stopped his chewing at the other end of the table, and his tangled brows brushed down over his eyes as he laid a look on Burro.

Tad said, "So! You didn't tell me that, Mary. That settles it!" His voice was sharp, savage. He turned and strode out, and as he went out through the door he put his right hand to his holster, unconsciously testing the weight and position of it, as if Gault was waiting right out there in the yard.

Miss Mary cried after him, following him as far as the doorstep. Burro had never heard her voice sound like that, and it cut him with a vague fear of what he had done. Then hoofs dug into the yard, and through the open doorway, past Miss Mary, he saw Tad riding out and lining southward.

Old Chinook spoke, talking in his rusty growl. "Gault's a killer. Keeps three-four guns hangin' under the bar, an' shoots through the wood. That's how he got others, an' that's how he'll get Tad. Bub, you hadn't oughta tol' him. That Tad, he ain't no match at all for Gault. It's murder! What'd you do it fer? Don't you like him?"

"Sure . . . I like him. That's why I

done it." Burro was cold in his stomach. "I . . . I figgered he oughta go an' meet his man."

"You mean . . . you said that . . . deliberately?" It was Miss Mary talking, but it wasn't like her voice. "After I talked . . . pleaded . . . prayed! I had him won away from it. I know I had. Now he's gone. He's not a gunman. Gault will kill him! He'll kill him, and I'll never—"

"Now, Miss Mary—" Burro began faintly.

"Go away," she said, half whispering it. "They told me. They warned me it was a mistake. Go away, Burro. Please go away!"

She sat down. She didn't crumple, or burst out weeping, but sat there, straight in the chair and staring before her with that dead look on her face. Burro stumbled out of the house, and Chinook John followed him into the yard.

"You hadn't oughta done that, bub. You good as killed him," said the old man, and peered short-sightedly down toward the south trail. There was nothing to be seen that way, except a thin overhang of dust that traced the land's contour to as far as the rise that bounded the bottomland.

Burro ran to the stable. He didn't know what he could do, but the urge for movement forced him to Miss Mary's old Sherry mare. He couldn't stand still in the yard with his guilt and his awakened horror. For the first time he could envision Tad losing before Gault, going down before Gault's gun, and that was a pattern of events that was on the reverse side of what he had thought was a simple and proper weave. Miss Mary's eyes, as she'd looked at him back there in the house, burned a nightmare picture in his mind, and now he could see her nodding slowly, tiredly, to the warnings thrown at her.

"Bad blood in him! Comes of bad stock! You can't make a house dog out of a wolf pup! You can't. . . ."

He backed old Sherry out of her stall, clambered onto her, and with a bridle but no saddle, he kicked her to a surprised gallop across the yard. Old Chinook shouted at him, but he swung her through the gateway and got her headed southward. Old Chinook's shout followed him.

"Ye crazy button, what kin ye do? No

gun or nothin', an' thet ol' mare! Come back here . . . ye done enough misery, hell-tan yer ornery young hide!"

◆ ◆ ◆

CIBOLA was quiet this bright summer morning, and the unsteady clopping of old Sherry's hoofs raised a dusty disturbance along the street. Women were absent from view, but every doorway held its silent knot of men who watched with somber interest the batwing doors of the Sandy Bob Bar.

When he saw Tad's horse standing at the Sandy Bob hitchrack, Burro knew finally and definitely that the old Sherry mare was no match for a real horse. This thing was already begun and skidding to its conclusion. He hauled in the mare, left her drooping in the street, and ran to the saloon's side door.

From the interior of the blacksmith's shed across the short alley came a querulous comment, "What's that boomer's brat up to?"

And then the harsh voice of the blacksmith, urgent, imperative, "Get away from there, kid! G'wan home!"

Burro opened the side door a crack and stared into the saloon. It came as a shock of relief to him to see Tad standing alive and at ease by the bar, and Harl Gault tipping a bottle above two glasses between them. Four cattlemen sat at a table in the corner, cards spread before them. But they weren't playing. They merely sat gazing down at the table top, doing nothing, like men brooding over bad news and expecting worse to come. Compared with the four cattlemen, Tad and Gault looked idly meditative, aloof from any touch of trouble. These were the only occupants of the barroom, and typical enough this early in the day.

Tad and Gault drank together, set down their emptied glasses, and for a moment they, too, did nothing but merely stand there with the bar between them. Gault picked up the bottle. "Another?"

Tad shook his head. "One's enough." He took a dollar from his pocket and placed it on the bar. "I reckon you know why I'm here," he said.

Gault raised his black eyes, and there was cold humor in them. "I reckon I do." His left hand rested on the bar. His right

remained out of sight. He leaned his left elbow on the bar, and that put his body forward, still with his right hand hidden. "I reckon I know what I'd be here for, was I you."

Tad Denning took a half-step backward, both hands hanging. This was the code in him, the simple code that demanded that he give his man warning and time. The four men in the corner took their eyes from the table. Their eyes were pained, but they would do nothing, and this, too, was the code.

Tad said evenly, "Let's get it over with. Take care of yourself, Gault!" His right hand cut back to his single holster, but Gault didn't shift position, and the cold humor brightened in the black, staring eyes.



IN THEIR concentration of mind and muscle, it was not to be expected that a patter of feet should distract their notice. With death rising between them, the world took no part in their sharpened awareness of the single objective, and when Burro crashed into it he wrecked the sequence of events.

He butted full into Tad and knocked him off balance and out of position, and cried out a tumbling string of words that he never completed.

"He's got you covered with a gun under the—"

Gault's strap-hung gun roared its quick report under the bar, and its aim was accurate, but a shade too late to allow for a change in targets. Burro careened off Tad, and the crushing pain in his body was worse than it had been the time he fell off a freight train back in Missouri. The tearing impact slung him half around, and he stood dizzily facing the bar. His darkening sight narrowed its focus onto a white spot in a panel below the bar, a new

hole driven raggedly through the wood. Other spots appeared close to it, and he knew dimly that gunfire was thudding about him.

His knees gave way and he crouched on the floor, moaning a little. He got a hazy impression of Tad standing up with a gun that kept jerking in his hand, exploding smoke at each jerk. Then the bar was empty, Gault no longer standing up behind it, and all the racketing noise suddenly broke off.

"Y'got him, Tad," Burro whispered, but his mouth hit against the floor, and the daylight went away from him. . . .

He was in a bed when he came to, and they were there by him—Tad, Miss Mary and old Chinook John.

"Ye're shot through, kid," old Chinook said, "but ye'll get over it, don't worry."

"I ain't worryin'," Burro disclaimed in his weak whisper. "Tad sure fixed that Gault . . . he went down to hell an' gone!" he said, and old Chinook blinked as if one of his own wild stories had up and met him.

Miss Mary bent over and fixed his pillow, and he saw that look back in her eyes. That softly bright look, but deeper and richer than ever before. "You . . . you young savage!" she called him, but it was sweet as a song, the way she said it.

Tad said, in the same tone he might have used to a grown man, "Care to move out to my place, Burro . . . you and Chinook? We'll make a cowhand of you."

Burro glowed. "Gosh!" But he thought of something else. "I wouldn't want to leave Miss Mary."

"You wouldn't have to," Tad said. "She's . . . uh . . . movin' out there, too."

Burro thought that a pretty fine arrangement, and said so. "It's a grand good idea!" he approved earnestly.

Tad looked at Miss Mary over the bed, and his slow grin came. "We think so, too, Burro," he said gravely.



Greer sat down directly across from him.
The man with the carbine stood by. . . .



THE FIGHTING HAS-BEEN!

By WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSTON

A white-haired lawman, with his right arm in a sling, had one last job to perform among the hellions of Raiders' Gap, before he could turn his star over to a younger man—and die in peace.

THE Tucson stage rolled into Raiders' Gap at sundown. Distant hills stood shadow-wrapped and mysterious against the northern horizon; down toward the Border, twilight was a smoky haze upon the vast, lonely stretches of Lechuguilla.

The first coolness of evening lay along Yavapai Street, and already the town was stirring for this night's activities. The lively tinkle of a piano spilled out of Ledbetter's Saloon. In The Hollow, which had slept sullenly through the day's heat, pale glows of lamplight now showed back of those shades that were forever drawn against the countless secrets of Nelle Gorman's big, two-story house.

Ike Morris stopped the stage at Bran-

don's Hotel and let his passengers out, showing no attention to any of them until Sheriff Sam Gordon stepped down from the coach and lingered a moment, lighting his cheroot.

Whereupon Morris said, "You can still keep from being a plumb dang fool. Go in Brandon's, get a good night's sleep and ride back with me in the morning."

The sheriff was a gaunt, whip-like man. His hair was snow-white and his eyes were faded blue, watchful and remote with a deep knowledge of this country and of its ways. Sun and wind had burned his skin to the darkness of old leather, but now a peculiar pallor underlay and lightened that deep tan. His right arm was in a cast, bandaged to the elbow

and supported by a sling. A gunbelt slanted across his left hip; the star pinned to the pocket of his shirt was dull and battered.

He puffed on his cheroot and looked at Yavapai Street, knowing every foot of it and remembering many things that had happened along its dusty length.

"Give this thing up, Sam," Ike Morris insisted. "You ain't in no shape to go after a killer like Tonto Greer. Nobody expects it of you."

Sam Gordon smiled faintly. "Stage drivers," he said pleasantly, "have a bad habit of talking too much."

"Mebbe so," Morris retorted, "but they've got more sense than some peace officers I know. Going limping off after a man that the Earp boys left alone in Tombstone and The Kid ducked out of old Mesilla to keep away from. Anyway, how do you think you'd catch him? By sprinkling salt on his tail? The upshot of it will be me hauling you home sewed up in a blanket, dead as a mackerel."

The sheriff shook his head. "We'll haul Tonto back, alive and kicking."

Morris snorted. "You ain't got the sense God gave a goose. When you take Tonto Greer up to Tucson, jackasses will be roosting in trees."

Sam reached his left hand across to the right pocket of his vest and took out a heavy silver watch. He opened it and glanced at the time, snapped the case shut and put it back in his pocket.

"Maybe you're right, Ike," he said mildly, "but I've been at this business a long time. So don't be surprised next trip if you see a flock of jackasses, including a couple of stage drivers, roosting in that old cottonwood down by the blacksmith shop."

Morris said, "Hell!" and spoke to his horses. The stage rolled away toward the feed barn and Sheriff Sam Gordon walked up the steps of Brandon's Hotel.

He registered and went to the dining room for his supper. People stopped for a friendly word with him; Brandon came in and sat at his table.

"A little last minute business?" the hotel man asked.

Sam nodded, his attention centered on the clumsy task of handling a fork with his left hand.

"Why not let the new sheriff handle it?" Brandon suggested. "He goes into office next week, doesn't he?"

Sam put down the fork. "You know why I'm here, and that this is no job for a green hand."

Brandon leaned across the table. "Greer's got friends in the Gap, but he won't let you see him here. A wild bunch rides with him; you'll need a good posse if you go out after 'em."

"I'm too old to lead a posse on a long chase," Sam said. "I guess I'll have to handle this a little different."

Brandon shrugged. "I don't envy you the job."

Sam pushed back his chair and got up. "I wouldn't know much about running a hotel, either," he said, and went across the dining room and lobby and out to the street.



MOST of the business houses of Yavapai had closed, but in The Hollow there were lights and laughter and boisterous talk. Sam paused, lit a cheroot and walked on. At the corner of Hardin Street, he met Pete Crutcher and they stood there a while with the small talk of casual acquaintances between them.

Presently Sam drifted along. He returned the greetings of a group at the feed barn, and stopped in at the Trail's End Restaurant to speak to George and Constance Prichard. Later, he strolled down to the depot and watched a northbound freight go banging through the town. He turned then and went up the other side of the street.

Apparently he was a man at loose ends, killing time with idle wanderings. But in his mind, all of this was set to an old, familiar pattern, and he tried to think how it would be when such things were no longer a part of his life, giving this a long, bleak interval of consideration. Involuntarily he touched the battered star pinned to his shirt.

He thought back to the days when that star had been new and shiny. To wagon trains and the great trail herds. To Apache raiders sweeping down through Skeleton Valley. To raw new towns that were roar-

ing, blazing hells from dawn to dawn.

He brought his reflections up to the present: railroads, the yellow glow of windows in quiet, secure homes on the hillside across Stony Creek; telegraph wires that spanned the continent like the incredibly drawn-out web of some gigantic, inexhaustible spider.

"It's been a long time," he murmured.

His shoulders sagged a little and his footsteps fell into a slow, inelastic shuffle. Old. An old man facing retirement: a rocking chair, a sunny porch with memories and echoes to keep him warm.

But there was one comfort he could always turn to: Ruth, the slender, dark-haired girl he had married so many years ago. Heavier now, her hair almost as white as his own, yet she was so much the same that he felt a quick, almost youthful thrill at the mere thought of her. Sameness—perhaps that was her greatest charm. So steadfast and dependable, her courage so strong and unfaltering. Always waiting for him, hiding her anxieties behind a smile, keeping her fears secret and unmentioned.

Unmentioned until just before the last election. He recalled just how she had looked, walking to the door with him that morning; how she had said, "Sam, the shotgun of that drunken Mexican at Tubac changed things. You're in no condition to be sheriff any longer."

He saw then, for the first time, that she was old. Unshed tears, stoutly resisted, welled up and made a wet shine against her eyes. Her hands were unsteady and there was a faint tremor in her voice.

Those things Sam saw and considered. Very gently he said, "This is my last term. I won't announce for reelection."

Thus Tom Warren was the new sheriff. Tom, with his quick laughter and reckless, inexperienced courage. That had been Sam's first thought when word came to Tucson that Tonto Greer was border-jumping south of Raiders' Gap. He went home and told Ruth about it, saying nothing beyond a mere statement of the facts.

She had stood very still for a long, quiet interval.

"Tom's two babies are cute and sweet," he said tentatively. "He and his wife are so young and so happy—somehow they remind me of our first years together."

Thereupon Ruth had turned away and in a moment came back with his guns, smiling. She put aside the right-hand one and buckled on the other belt so that its holster swung against his left hip.

"Tonto," Sam told her mildly, "has sorta expressed a desire to shoot the old sheriff out of office, then boot the new one across Pima County."

Ruth tied the holster down so that it hung at an exact angle. Still smiling, she said, "The first part of that threat has been made a lot of times, but never kept."

Yet when she walked to the porch with him and kissed him goodbye, her smile was weak and wavering; her cheeks deathly pale. He saw her weigh his chances with a woman's realism and finding the almost inevitable answer.

"I guess I had relaxed a little, thinking this was all so nearly finished," she admitted apologetically. "Telegraph me from Raiders' Gap as soon as it's over. The waiting's going to be harder than ever before."

Thinking of all this, Sam Gordon traversed the length of Yavapai and turned down to The Hollow. He pushed through the batwings of Ledbetter's Saloon and stepped up to the bar, showing the place and its occupants a brief, deceptive interest.

The bartender set up his ordered drink and presently Sid Ledbetter came across that big, smoky room and stood beside the sheriff.

"Quite a spell," he said, "since we've had you for a customer."

"Yes," Sam agreed.

Ledbetter smiled, nodded to the bartender. "The sheriff's drink is on the house."

"Thanks, but not this time," Sam said remotely, and put a coin on the bar.

Ledbetter's eyes showed a change, quickly restored. "If I can be of any other service," he suggested.

Sam said bluntly, "I'm looking for Tonto Greer. Know where he is?"

"Tonto Greer," Ledbetter said with bland thoughtfulness. "I don't believe I ever heard of him."

A Mexican edged along the bar, grinning and bobbing his head. "Señor Gordon. You remember me, no?"

"Sure I do," Sam replied, inwardly

cursing a memory turned slow and unreliable. A sudden thought touched him and he said to the Mexican, his tone slightly louder than usual, "Do me a favor, *amigo*. Go to Bill Claxton's stable and tell him I will want a horse to ride down to San Sanoya in the morning."

He saw this have its effect upon the room, saw the betraying flicker in Sid Ledbetter's eyes, and knew that he had made a close guess.

The Mexican hurried away, and Sam said, "Tonto has a hideout in San Sanoya, hasn't he?"

Ledbetter said again, "I don't know Tonto Greer."

"That," Sam observed sententiously, "is at least one thing in his favor."

Ledbetter laughed and slapped his hand against the bar. "You don't like me, Gordon, and there's no reason for it. I've been your friend a long time. I voted for you the last time you ran for sheriff."

"A lost vote, so far as you were concerned," Sam told him, neither his voice nor his manner revealing anything beyond those cryptic words.

Ledbetter's laughter stopped. His face flushed brick red. For a moment the two men regarded each other in silence, then Sam turned and went out to the street and down to Nelle Gorman's house.



ONE of the girls admitted him and showed him to the front parlor.

"I want to see Nelle," he said, and the girl, flustered and apprehensive, went away.

There was a tall, lanky boy in the parlor. Immediately he stood up and leaned against the wall, his pale eyes watching the sheriff with a revealing alertness.

Sam said, "Son, you may have hoofs and a forked tail, but to me you're an angel, unknown and unwanted. I got other business here."

Without speaking or relaxing his vigilance, the boy slid along the wall and backed out the door. The girls in the parlor drifted away, too—except one with dark, bitter eyes.

"It isn't often we're honored with a visit by the law," she said, and sat down at the piano and played *Camptown Races*

for him. She played the tune well.

Sam took a cheroot from his pocket and sat there, smiling faintly and keeping time to the music with his foot.

Nelle Gorman came in, and the girl quit playing. "The last time you were here," Nelle said, "you shot a man on my stairway and took two of the girls away."

"Yes," Sam said, giving a moment of thought to that long-ago night.

Nelle told the girl at the piano, "Bring a bottle of bourbon and some plain water."

Sam took a cheroot from his pocket and fumbled for a match. Nelle struck one and held it to the tip of the cheroot. The girl came back with a tray: whiskey and glasses and a pitcher of water. Nelle motioned her away, mixed a drink and put it on the table at Sam's elbow.

Outside, in the hall, three or four of the girls began singing:

*"Mistress Nellie's got a beau,
Got a beau—got a beau;
Mistress Nellie's got a beau
And he's the shur—iff."*

Sam grinned and took the big silver watch out of his pocket. He sat there opening the case and snapping it shut.

Finally Nelle Gorman shrugged her shapely shoulders. "This ain't no social call. I never could get any business out of you. What's on your mind?"

Sam snapped the watch case again and returned it to his pocket.

"Sid Ledbetter told me you knew where Tonto Greer was to be found." Then, swiftly, before she could answer, "Is he in town, at San Sanoya, or at Breck Fenton's ranch?"

He watched her with deep absorption, but not a flicker of expression touched the careful set of her features.

"You're a liar," she said coolly. "Sid didn't tell you anything of the kind. I never heard of Tonto Greer."

Sam drew a deep breath and got up, leaving the drink untouched. "Yes," he admitted, "I guess I was mistaken about Sid saying you knew Tonto. Maybe it was somebody else who told me—or just a thought wandering about in my mind. Anyhow, I think I'll mosey down to San Sanoya in the morning."

"Don't let me delay you none," Nelle told him. "The farther you ride away

from Raiders' Gap, the better it suits me. I don't like star-toters and this dirty business of man-hunting."

"Well," he said dryly, "all of us can't have nice, clean jobs. Goodnight, Nelle."

He walked to Yavapai and along it to the hotel. He spoke casually to the men in the lobby and went on up the stairway. At the second floor landing, he stopped and stood in the dark hallway, listening.

A short silence lay in the wake of his departure, then a man said, "Sam's getting old and he's got an old man's habit of gab. Think of him telling Sid Ledbetter that he's going to San Sanoya in the morning. He'd just as well sent word to Greer."

Brandon's heavy voice cut in. "That kid from Yuma was at Nelle Gorman's and he says Sam showed up there for a

the feed barn; waited there, his mind an arena for many warring thoughts.

Presently a man came out of Ledbetter's, stepped up to his saddle and galloped out of town, southward toward San Sanoya. Sam spoke to his horse and followed the man.

The way lay first across the flatlands, through sparse mesquite and a scatter of cholla; an occasional Green Tree of the Desert threw dark, lacy shadows upon the sandy soil.

Moonlight was like a thin white veil, and all of Sam's patience and skill was needed in trailing the rider ahead. He stayed back, following the dust spoor, but once or twice when the man stopped to listen to the noises of the night, he and his horse loomed up as a faint, ghostly

If you cotton to the rousing fiction of men who never counted the odds when they set out to bring law to the range, read Frank C. Robertson's great novel, "Hell-Town's Last Samaritan," in May .44 WESTERN!

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confab with her—another sure way of getting word to Greer."

"Sam's too old for hard riding and straight shooting," some other man added. "If he goes down to San Sanoya tomorrow, he'll never come back alive."

"Hard riding and straight shooting!" Sam muttered. "I reckon most folks figure that's about all there is to it."

He moved on to his room, placed a lamp in front of the window and lit it. Then he stretched out on the bed, took his right arm out of the sling and cradled it across a pillow. He lay like that for a while.

Presently he got up and extinguished the light, then peered cautiously out the window. Moonlight was a deep silver mist and shadows lay blackly upon the earth. A man moved furtively away from the back wall of Mill's Emporium and angled across toward Ledbetter's Saloon. Whereupon Sam unlocked his door and went silently down the back stairs.



A HORSE was hitched behind the Trail's End Restaurant. Sam loosened the reins and rode the horse down to the dark shadows alongside

blur. It was such moments that Sam had to be on guard against, holding his own mount very still until the man again rode on.

Presently the trail veered eastward to the desert's edge, then up the low, rocky promontory of the foothills. Here chollas thickened and grew to a greater size, and giant saguaros rose tall and solid against the night. This was familiar country to Sam Gordon, and he thought of those years when there had been enough rain on the desert to cover these very hillsides with lupine and verbenas and the red and yellow of blooming cacti.

At Nagone Pass, the rider ahead turned northward along an old, little-used trail which climbed a stony way into the taller hills. Sam pulled up at the intersection and sat there a while, an almost forgotten knowledge of this trail gradually strengthening into a map-like remembrance: the dry creek bed, the narrow, shallow valley beyond the buttes, the tumble-down buildings of the long-deserted Barca ranch. And in these things he understood exactly where he would find Tonto Greer.

He stuck a cheroot in his mouth and chewed on it, feeling a good and solid satisfaction.

"Hard riding and straight shooting," he thought contemptuously. "A pound of that's not worth an ounce of simpler things: savvy of this country and its secret friendships, a little knowledge of what certain people will do under certain circumstances."

He chuckled, said aloud, "I wouldn't have found Tonto in a month of riding; knowing who his friends were is taking me to him in a few hours."

He rode on, up to the dry creek bed and across the shallow valley. A mile from the Barca ranch site, he left the trail and went straight into the hills. After a while, he stopped and hitched his horse in a mesquite-bordered coulee. From there, he proceeded on foot, pausing now and then to check the small noises that were normal sounds of the night.

Presently the Barca ranch buildings loomed up ahead, stark skeletons in the moonlight. The roof of the main structure had fallen in and the barns were mere piles of dark rubbish. But the sturdy old bunkhouse was still standing, and beneath its one door and around the loosely shuttered windows there were thin, yellow pencils of light.

Warily Sam circled the place, then slipped quietly to the side of the bunkhouse. He crouched there, listening to the talk inside. From this, he lay an accurate reckoning upon the number of people in that room: Tonto Greer, the rider from Raiders' Gap and one other man.

Presently the rider said, "I'd better be moseying along. Ledbetter will want me to be back before closing time."

"Tell Sid and Nelle I'm obliged for this warning," Tonto Greer said. "They won't lose nothing by it. When old Sheriff Gordon comes riding down toward San Sanya tomorrow, we'll be waiting for him." His laughter was a deep rumble, sardonic and triumphant.

Sam stepped away from the wall. He took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and hung them across his bandaged right arm. His left hand lifted the heavy Frontier colt from its holster; the multiple click of its hammer made a small, metallic rip.

Without hurry or hesitancy, he walked to the door, shouldered it open and stepped inside the bunkhouse.

THE unexpectedness of it caught Greer and his men flat-footed, and for a moment the room assumed the fixed stillness of a picture. Then they slowly raised their hands. Greer tried to move so that his body would touch the table where the lamp was. Greer was a tricky hombre.

Sam Gordon said gently, "You know better than that," and motioned Greer aside with a slight movement of his gun barrel.

Still speaking mildly, he ordered them against the wall.

"Unbuckle your belts," he said, and their holstered revolvers clattered against the floor.

He dropped the handcuffs and stepped back. "Pick 'em up and put 'em on," he told Greer. To the other men, he said, "Stand hitched, boys, and cheat the buzzards."

They listened to the even, unhurried run of his voice, saw the stony stillness of his eyes and the loose, balanced way he held the cocked revolver. Greer picked up the handcuffs. The other two men leaned against the wall, quiet and unmoving. They evidently knew Gordon.

Some slight sound, some intuitive warning—perhaps a betraying change in Tonto Greer's eyes—jerked Sam around. It was a belated move, for directly behind him stood a man with a carbine held at the alert. Sam swung his revolver about, but the man struck the gun from his hand with a swift, chopping blow of the carbine's barrel.

Sam drew back a step and looked at his bleeding knuckles. His thin shoulders lifted in a philosophical shrug.

"I made a good, wide circle, yet failed to spot your look-out," he said. "I guess I'm getting old and careless. Well, what the hell!"

Greer stood there in the center of the room a moment, toying with the handcuffs, jiggling them up and down, rattling the steel chain. His laughter came in a sudden burst, harsh and ragged. Sam Gordon heard that note of unsteadiness and placed upon it an instant and accurate evaluation.

"This sorta changes things," Greer said exultantly. "There ain't no fool like an old fool—thinking you could take Tonto

Greer that easy; thinking you could take me at all." He motioned to a small table in a corner of the room.

"Step over and have a seat. It's been a good while since I've had a chance to sit down and talk to a sheriff."

Sam took the chair at the yonder edge of the table, so that his back was against the wall. Greer sat down directly across from him. The man with the carbine stood by and the others buckled on their recovered gunbelts.

Greer built a cigarette with deliberate slowness, pausing to glance up at his prisoner now and then.

Sam's face was calm and completely inexpressive. He took out the big silver watch, glanced at it and put it back in his vest pocket, coolly inattentive to the menacing muzzle of the carbine.

Greer lit his cigarette. "You're a pretty smart old fox, Gordon, but I've been laying for you since the time you sent my pal, Jack Spain, down to Yuma. I swore then that I'd kill you some day, but now it looks like I'll have to do the job at night." He grinned and took a deep draw from the cigarette. "I wish Jack could be at the Gap in the morning when your horse wanders in, with you tied across the saddle, dead as hell, and that old rusty star pinned through your nose like a ring in a pig's snout."

Sam's features remained still and unperturbed. Carefully he removed his right arm from the sling and rested it across the table. He did not say anything at all.

Hot, tawny lights began to burn in the depths of Greer's eyes. "Damn' you, maybe you think I'm not going to kill you! Maybe you think I'm not going to send your body in to the Gap, tied to that horse, as a warning to the new sheriff and to every lawman this side of Tombstone."

Sam said, unemotionally, "I made a mistake in not locating the man you had stationed outside. And you've made a mistake in not figuring that I'd be prepared for some such emergency as this. I may be killed in this bunkhouse, but you won't be the one to do it.

"I'm leaving the sheriff's office next week and this is probably my last arrest. The warrant for you says dead or alive, and I'm serving it tonight—one way or the other."

Greer leaned back in his chair. "I reckon you're going to sit there and talk me to death, or maybe—"

"Look at this bandaged arm," Sam told him quietly. "Look at it good, Tonto. See anything strange about it?"

Greer said, "Listen, you can't run any sort of a sandy on me. I'll—"

"Usually," Sam continued patiently, "the splints or cast comes down to about the knuckles and you can see the fingers sticking out." His voice lowered a full tone, flat and colorless. "You don't see my fingers because the bandage covers a .41 derringer that's in my hand—with nothing but a thin piece of gauze between its muzzle and your chest. So I'm making the arrest, dead or alive—and your men and their guns are not worth a damn, so far as you're concerned."

"You're bluffing," Greer shouted. "You've just got a broken arm. There ain't no derringer. You—" His voice faded to a hoarse whisper.

He looked at the flat stillness of Sam's eyes, at the cold, implacable set of his features. Greer's breathing became loud and hurried. A bead of perspiration popped out on his forehead, trickled down and caught against one of his bushy eyebrows.

The man with the carbine moved up a step. Greer said again, "You're bluffing."

"All you've got to do to find out," Sam told him very gently, "is to check the bet." He moved his elbow against his body, so that the bandaged arm was in direct line with Greer's heart.

Ominously a muffled, metallic click sounded against the stillness of the room.



COLOR drained from Greer's cheeks. He lifted his hands, palms outward, and held his right back to stay any move of the man with the carbine.

A coyote's wail, long-drawn and lonely, drifted down from the hills. The horse hitched outside shook itself, rattling stirrups and bits. One of the men back of Greer moved, and his feet made a brief, slight scraping against the floor.

Sam, holding his attention to Greer and to the table where the lamp was, said, "Make up your mind, Tonto."

Greer drew a deep, quivering breath. He wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand.

"He's got me, boys. Unbuckle your belts again. Charlie, put the rifle over there in the corner."

The men obeyed reluctantly and without comment.

"Stand up and turn your back," Sam told Greer.

When this was done, he lifted the outlaw's revolver, cocked it and held it in his left hand. There was still no hurry about him and no sharpness to his voice. He worked easily.

He said, "Pick up the handcuffs, Tonto, and this time put 'em on." He lay his cold, unblinking stare upon the other three men, now lined up against the wall. "We're going out the door and leaving it open. If you boys make a move or try to follow, or blow out the lamp, it will be just the same as if you put a bullet through your compadre's heart. Mind what I say."

He slipped his right arm into its sling, stepped forward and pushed the cocked revolver in his left hand against Greer's back. They moved across the room like that and opposite the other men, Sam said, "Turn."

Thus sheltered, he backed out the door, drawing Greer along with him. Step by step they backed away from the bunkhouse and came to where the messenger from Raiders' Gap had left his horse. At a word from Sam, the outlaw fumbled at the reins with his manacled hands. He was swearing under his breath.

Sam said, "Bring the horse along and just keep backing up, son."

They covered a quarter of a mile like that, then Sam stopped Greer with a jab of the gun barrel, turned him and followed the turn, still staying behind him. He was very cautious.

"Drop the reins and walk on ten steps, stop and stand still."

Greer dropped the reins and stepped on ten paces, halted and did not look around. Thereupon Sam holstered his gun, flipped the reins over the horse's head, stepped up to the saddle and drew the weapon again, all in one swift, continuous, flowing movement.

"Go along now," he ordered. "I'll tell

you when to turn and which way you're to go."

Greer stumbled through mesquite and catsclaw, muttering thick-voiced profanity. Finally he said, "Hell, I can't walk all the way to the Gap. These damn boots are already blistering my heels. When the boys get their horses and overtake us, old man, I'm going to gut-shoot you and leave you for the wild pigs to—"

"I've got pretty good ears," Sam interposed. "I'll hear the boys long before they overtake us and kinda arrange a little reception for them. But you don't have to worry about that, son. You won't be along by that time. I'll serve my warrant—the dead part—soon as I hear a hoof on the backtrail."

Presently they came to where Sam had left the other horse. "All right," he said. "Unhitch that pony and climb up on the thing."

Tonto Greer made one last, persuasive effort.

"Look, Gordon," he said. "I've got ten thousand in gold cached down in Sonora. You're retiring from office. You're going to need money. You're old and—"

Sam said wearily, "Get on your horse, son, and head for Raiders' Gap. I'm not hearing a word you say."



THE next morning at five o'clock, Ike Morris drove the Tucson stage up from the feed barn and stopped at Brandon's Hotel. Tonto Greer, his hands cuffed in front of him, stood on the hotel porch. Just back of him Sheriff Sam Gordon sat in a chair, puffing at a cheroot.

Morris whistled in surprise, crawled down from the box and started walking back along the street.

"Wait," Sam called. "Where you going?"

"To get a couple of other jackasses and start roosting in that cottonwood tree," Morris told him.

Sam chuckled. "Some other time, Ike. Right now I've got a job for you."

Morris came back, grinning, and Sam marched Greer out to the stage. He gave the driver a key, said, "Take him inside, Ike. Unfasten one of the cuffs and lock it through the big ring on the yonder door."

When Morris stepped back out of the coach, Sam said, "I've got a fool notion Ruth's kinda worried about me. Mind guarding the prisoner while I give Brandon a message to telegraph her soon as the office opens?"

Morris patted the holster at his hip. "Glad to, Sam. This here gent murdered a driver on one of our northern stages a year or so ago."

After Sam had gone, Morris said, "A devil of a bad man you turned out to be—brought in by a cripple."

"Cripple, hell!" Greer retorted. "That cast is just a blind. He's got a derringer under there, ready to blow a man's heart out. That's why you can't see his fingers at the end of the bandages. What a damn fool you are."

Ike Morris stared at the man a moment,

then slapped his leg and whooped with laughter.

"The reason you didn't see Sam's fingers," he explained, "is because there wan't none. That Mexican's buckshot tore his hand up so bad Doc Hardy had to cut it off right back to the wrist."

Tonto Greer was still dazed and muttering when Sheriff Sam Gordon came back down the hotel steps.

"But he had a derringer. He cocked it. I heard the hammer click—I know he had it."

Sam said, "You heard me press my elbow against my vest pocket and snap shut the watch I had purposely left open. That and your yellow backbone rattling. That's all you heard. I knew by that shaky laugh of yours that you didn't have the guts to call a good, stiff bluff."

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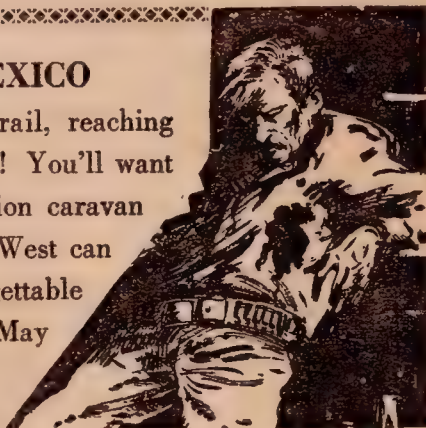
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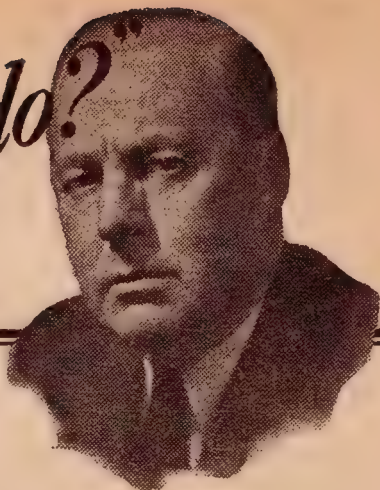
**10 STORY
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May issue on sale April 10th

Other stories in next month's *10 Story Western* will explore seven additional outposts of pioneer drama in the West. A few of the top-hand writers whose names will appear on the May contents page are Bloodhart, Pearsol, Ernenwein, Lynch and Steele.



"What can I do?"



"LIKE millions of other Americans, I've asked myself one question repeatedly ever since these fateful words popped out of my radio:

"Japanese planes have bombed Hawaii!"

"Daily, nightly, I've turned this question over and over in my mind—with the reading of every news bulletin on the air and the appearance of every epic headline.

"What can I do—here at home?

"What can I do—while Americans are fighting and dying in the far reaches of the Pacific for freedom and for me?"

"What can I do?

"I've looked in my shaving mirror for an answer—and found none.

"I've seen only the perplexed face of a middle-aged man—a man too old to bear arms.

"I've glanced at my hands, too,

a thousand times, only to learn a brutal truth.

"They are soft and white—strangers to the production line where only skilled hands are wanted now."

"What can I do?

"Only last night I found the answer as my eyes fell on my wife's knitting bag and my ears caught the click of her knitting needles.

"I could give to the Red Cross. I could answer its urgent call for funds, now so sorely needed.

"I could give to the limit of my means to aid and comfort those who are giving so much more.

"Yes—I could do something. Not much—but something.

"And I have—today."

Give and give generously—to your local chapter—to volunteer solicitors. Give when you can, where you can, as much as you can.

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AMERICAN RED CROSS **WAR FUND CAMPAIGN**

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No Taps For Fighting Men

By **TOM
W. BLACKBURN**

IN THE closing months of the War between the States, trouble arose from among the Indian tribes of the western plains of Kansas. The whites were involved in a struggle of their own and, the redmen thought, the time was ripe for driving out the settlers and road-builders who were advancing deep into the grasslands.

The Shawnees, Choctaw and Pawnees all kept numerous hard-striking raiding parties at work in the settled territory. So critical had become the menace by the end of the Civil War that whole companies of Union soldiery were dispatched to the troubled frontier.

These men, underpaid and weary of fighting, made short and final work of the subjection of the tribes. They were eager to return once more to their homes and the ways of life which they had abandoned to take up arms. But Washington was a long way from Kansas. When the word came that the tribes had withdrawn to the territory assigned them, and that the frontier was peaceful once more, a misguided order went out to Kansas. The soldiery was not to be returned to an eastern mustering-out point, but was to be disbanded on the ground, and without delay.

Thus these men, suddenly released, with little funds and no adequate means of reaching their homes, were forced to turn to the frontier, itself, for food and support. That they did so honestly, in the beginning, seeking work and a permanent place in the grasslands, is beyond a doubt. But the settlers had been long harried by the tribes and impoverished by the war. And, as is usual at the end of great conflicts, mustered-out soldiery was held in poor regard.

The result was that these soldiers, many with no trade to take up nor niche to fit into, formed loosely into guerilla

A gallant ex-Union soldier landed, broke and hungry, among the good prairie farmers for whose ideals he'd fought . . . and they called him "dog" and denied him grub. So, to save his life, Sam Dean turned guerilla—and found a new faith at Boothill's bloody gates!



He chopped once, a back-handed stab against the side of the farmer's head.

bands, taking their needs from the people of the territory as they wished. They roamed the country in dozens, in pairs, alone—securing by violence what was not offered them in neighborliness.

Big Sam Dean was one of these men, a corporal in the disbanded Ninth Missouri Volunteers



THE last skirmish with the Pawnee had been on the flats above the Arkansas. The soldiers had been mustered out at Pawnee Rock. And at Independence, a big-bodied man, raised to the unending labor of life in the piney woods of the Ozarks, would be able to find fit work on the river boats. Captain Beatty had told Sam that. He had told Sam he was a good man. He had slapped Sam on the shoulder and wished him good luck.

But it was three hundred weary miles from Pawnee Rock to Independence, and a man who's been walking for three years doesn't set right off on a hike like that. He looks around, and he tries one thing and another: the stage lines and the freighters and, finally, the scattered farms. And he's got to eat. And it becomes a desperate business.

Beatty never had had time to teach Sam how to figure, and Sam wasn't sure, but it had been two months, now, and Independence was yet a long distance away. Sam was hungry, gaunt from poor feeding for weeks on end. His shoes were gone, his uniform ragged and his temper frayed to hell. They brought a man down out of the hills, they gave him a gun and told him to fight for them. But when the fighting was done, and they'd turned him loose, he was still a slack-jointed hillman, and they'd have none of him. Let the beggar starve and be damned to him!

Sam hunkered down in the brush, looking at the house across the creek. He'd been looking at it and thinking about it all the long time he'd been coming up the wide distance it was visible across the flatness of the land. And he'd made up his mind. Too many times he'd come up of an evening to a door like this, his cap in his hand and his face seamed with pleasure from thinking of the comfort be-

hind the lighted windows. Too often he'd knocked and said, "Evenin', ma'am," to the white face which peered fearfully at him for a moment before the door slammed shut again and a rifle poked through a loophole into his face.

He knew better, now. In the brush thickets he'd met Red Collier, another man from the Ninth Missouri, and Red Collier's men—other soldiers, round-bellied and bold-eyed, well fed and with horses to ride and whiskey to drink. They'd fed him and laughed at him and ridden on—armed and hard and seeking trouble, finding life good. *They* were the ones who were right. And what they could do as a band, he could do alone. For he was a big man and very hungry

A certain window at the rear, letting into a lean-to off of the kitchen, came down silently in the firm grip of Big Sam's wide hands. Inside, the smell of food was strong, almost like the feel of uncut whiskey on an empty belly. Through the doorway he could see a corner of the stove, upon which sat a huge iron stew-kettle—steaming.

But he could see, also through the doorway, a girl beyond the stove. A young, slim, lithe girl—like the one who had cut him with a quirt in the middle of the street at Cottonwood Springs, when he had tripped and fallen in front of her fine, curried horse.

She moved briskly, her apron swaying, and in a little while she turned just right. Sam was thorough. He caught her, one hand around her waist and the other across her face, lifted her so that her kicking feet made no sound, and jerked her into the darkness of the lean-to. She fought like a cat until she saw the dark shadow of his drawn and stubbled face. A shudder of terror went through her, then, and she sagged limply in his hands. He put her down, found sacking hung to dry, and bound and gagged her with rough and certain care.

The stew was hot. He burned his fingers, stabbing out a chunk of the meat floating richly in it. And he had but one tantalizing bite before a second woman came into the kitchen from the other quarters of the house. She was an older woman—older and square and steady.

She made no outcry when she saw Sam, but turned with amazing swiftness to a corner where a long gun stood against the wall.

Still clinging to his chunk of dripping meat, Sam leaped across the room, caught the rising barrel of the weapon and raised it toward the ceiling. He had been fast, and his swiftness saved him. But the woman could handle a gun. Her fingers raked across the trigger even as he took it from her, and the weapon made sudden, violent thunder in the little room.

Sam jerked the woman to him, past him; he thrust her roughly into the lean-to, then pulled the door tight behind her. Turning, he saw a lanky, heavy-boned man with the thin stubble of youth on his face and the muscles of a plow-ox in his body. He, also, thrust a gun before him. But he was slower than the woman had been.

Sam seized the barrel, jerked upward against the other's solid grip so sharply that the stock splintered at the lock and the barrel came away in Sam's hands. He chopped once, a back-handed stab against the side of the farmer's head. The man folded backward into the room from which he had come.

Sam stepped over him and into that room. Three others were there. One, a second girl, white of face and rigid with terror, was obviously the older sister of the girl he had seen first in the kitchen. The other two were children, a small boy and a screaming baby. Brushing past these in a long stride, Sam tore open another door to face a queer spectacle.



A DISARRANGED bed stood in the center of the room. Beside it, face gray with strain, an old man was trying to balance himself on a pair of thin legs encased in crude, awkward splinting. He went backward onto the bed with a breath of pressure from Sam's hand and sat upright, sobbing.

"Get out!" he choked. "Take what you want, you robbing, cut-throat coyotes, but leave me and my family be. Get out!"

"Shut up!" Sam said, and went back to the younger man.

Save for the rifle in the kitchen and the

shattered weapon whose barrel trailed from Sam's hand, there was no other sign of weapons about the main room. The man on the floor felt for his head, moaned, then tried to get up. Sam lifted him and flung him into a deep chair.

The girl who knelt by the children came to her feet, leaned over the chair and tenderly loosed the throat of the man's shirt. The little boy came whimpering to the man's knee. Sam turned his back on them, went through the kitchen and pulled open the door of the lean-to. The older woman came out and, after her, the first girl, who must have been her younger daughter. She was freed, now, of the sacking with which Sam had pinioned her. Sam picked up the good rifle and leaned it against the wall at his elbow.

"I'll eat, ma'am," he said to the older woman.

For a moment she stood motionless, staring at him. In that moment Sam saw a bitterness as great as his own, a hatred of his drifting, homeless kind as virile as his own for these people who had of plenty and would not share. And he saw courage for which there was no equal. When the woman spoke, it was in a quiet tone of authority which steadied the terror of the girl whom Sam had bound.

"Set out the stew and bread and potatoes, Ellie," she said. "I think he hurt Joey, and the kids are crying, and I got to see Pa . . ."

The girl moved automatically, setting out huge plates of food. Sam dragged a chair up beside the rifle and pulled the table up to him. For a little while, there was no taste to the food, so rapidly did he wolf it down. Then enjoyment came. The warmth of the stove, the yellow light of the lamps, an air of solidity and comfort and hominess which seemed thick under this roof. After a while the young man came in, rubbing a lump above his ear, and stood by the stove. Near his hand was the lifter. One of those round, smoking lids, swiftly thrown . . .

Sam looked bleakly at him and this one whom they called Joey moved a little to one side in plain guilt.

"The rest of them will want to be fed, too," he said to Ellie in a harsh voice. "Don't give this one devil all of the food or there'll be hell to pay."

Sam cleared his jaws of food. "Ain't no others," he said.

Joey's face brightened against his will. "Alone?" he breathed. "Then you're not one of Collier's men?"

Sam shook his head. No, he wasn't one of Collier's men. He'd just patterned himself after the guerillas, that was all. And it had worked. He was eating, eating like he had not since Captain Beatty had let them kill their last buffalo. But it wasn't altogether good. A taste was lacking, somehow. Maybe that old man on his broken and splinted legs, there in the far room—trying to come out to his family in their trouble. Maybe the screaming baby. Maybe the woman who had no fear of him. He didn't know.

The older girl, the mother of the children, came into the doorway, leaned against Joey, and stared apprehensively at Sam as he shoveled in the food. Joey's arms slipped down over her shoulders and seemed to give her courage. Her lips curled back from her teeth.

"When you've eaten, are you done with us?"

Sam shook his head. "Got to eat regular. One meal won't do. Would you work me, here?"

Joey's voice came, harsh and bitter. "Work a kicked-out renegade from the army on a place where there's three women and some kids and only one man to his feet? Not knowing when one of them might get strangled, or an axe in their head, or a knife in their back!"

Sam looked at his big hands for a moment. They were made to work with, not to do violence. But there wasn't any chance for them. Not among these flinty farmers. They made a man one of them to fight their fights—and a dog and worse than a dog when it was done. Red Collier and his crew knew about this. *They* understood. *They* had it right. But a small protest rose within him.

"Captain Beatty said I was a good man," he offered. Then the lines of his jaw tightened. "I'd not want to be worked here! I'll take gold, instead. And if not gold, I'll take your silver. I'll take this gun and shells and traveling-food and a good horse. I'll take what I damned well please!"

"You!" Sam jerked his hand at Joey.

"You get the stuff and put it on the table. And I'll keep your woman here while you're gone, so there's no mistake!"

Joey surged forward angrily. Sam swung the gun away from the wall. And he was wise. He knew a good man would not stop at taking lead to save his woman, so he leveled the piece on the girl, herself. Joey pulled up, taut and dangerous. The older woman came again from the other room, touched the man's shoulder and moved to the table in front of Sam. Reaching into the front of her dress, she pulled out a small leather bag. But by the sound it made against the planking of the table-top, Sam knew it was the family's hoard of gold.

"Do what he says, Joey," the woman said steadily. "He had Pa out of bed and up on his splints and riled terrible. But the wrappings held and I've got him settled down again, now. There'll always be a better day and the Good Lord has a special coin for them that do wrong and them that are done wrong by. Get along, Joey, and put Pa's saddle on your gray horse."



JOEY had been but moments out toward the corrals when a shot smashed against the prairie silence. A pause followed, then a brace of more shots and a raucous, brutal yell. There came another lag of silence—then pandemonium. And out of it, hammering swiftly toward the house, the footfalls of a desperately running man. It was not one of the petrified women, not even the older one, but Big Sam who opened the door for Joey, hauled him within, and barred the portal swiftly behind him.

"Red Collier!" Joey jerked out, and pulled at a place on his side where his shirt was already turning dark. "You lying devil . . . alone, you said!"

The older woman rubbed her hands on her apron. "How many, Joey?"

"Four or five, maybe, and Collier. I saw him plain, red hair and grinning face, looking down a gunshot. And two of the pigs hanging to the corral poles back of him with their throats cut and the blood puddling on the ground. It'll be us the same way, next!"

Sam said, "Get in the other room with the old man. Lie on the floor and keep the little ones quiet. Take water for the man's wound."

Joey spat out a curse which made the women flinch. "So you can let them in without a shot! Give me that gun. Love of God, a man's got a right to fight for his family!"

Slowly Big Sam passed the good gun across and picked up the barrel of the piece which had broken. He saw the older woman's gaze follow him curiously. Then she herded the two grown girls and the children of the eldest ahead of her, and he knew she would care for them and keep them silent as he had ordered.

Joey had the gun up and was to one side of the window, waiting. Sam swept the lamp to the floor and trod on the wick in the moment that a second murderous yell signaled the charge of Red Collier and his men.

It was all right for Joey to have the good gun. It was all right that Joey had his chance to fight for his home. Sam knew he could not do better with the weapon. Once he had eaten with these men outside. He knew them and what they wanted. There were women, women

young and white and clean, in this house. No single gun and no single man could keep Collier's crew outside these walls. But once they were inside . . .

Lead tore at the window. Joey answered with a grim, careful shot. A man's cry choked off in the darkness outside.

"One, by hell!" Joey muttered. And he changed position.

Sam hit him, then, as he had before. Not too hard. Just enough to get him out of the way of what was coming. No more . . .

◇ ◇ ◇

THE guerillas hit the door like an avalanche, tore it from its hinges and were in the kitchen—sour, savage men. Sam was a little to one side of the stove, fair in the middle of the room, where he could swing free. The first arc of the gun-barrel in his hands hissed before the bludgeon came against flesh and bone. So that made two of them. It was Collier, himself, who saw the shadow of Sam's bulk after that blow, and it was Collier, himself, who fired at it.

The gun-barrel was not whistling when

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and—now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 33, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1940, Frank B. Robinson.

it struck Red Collier down, for there was lead and pain in Sam's chest—but it was a stroke savage enough, even then, to have crushed the skull of a grizzly. The count was three.

There were two more of them, elusive shadows. But Sam could not find them. His hearing was fuzzy and sight useless in the stygian dark and the rough flooring reeled under his feet. He was conscious he swept utensils from a shelf with one swing of his weapon, drove down the flue of the stove with another, made kindling of one end of the table with the third.

But he grimly continued to thrash about the room. These were brutes, these men out of the brush and the night. It was animals like these who were responsible for his treatment across the grasslands, not the farmers. Theirs was an honest fear of ragged men and now his was an honest fury. The bitterness, the suffering, the hatred he had borne since he mustered out at Pawnee Rock flowed from him in a rush.

Savagery for the savage. Brutality for the brutal. Death for dealers in death! Time was measured by the beat of the bludgeon in his hands. Somewhere along, another gun snapped at him, then was silent. Yet he kept on with his ceaseless cutting of the air.

After a long time, it seemed, fresh riders came into the yard, more men poured into the house. Sam was beaten, then, and he knew it. But with great weariness, he turned against these newcomers, also. They were agile, these newcomers. They ducked. They were numerous and strong. They caught him up from behind. They took his weapon away and bumped him roughly into a corner. Then one of them struck a light.

Blinking, his vision hazy, Sam saw bloody ruin in the kitchen. He saw the newcomers wore cleaner uniforms than any guerillas, that there was a ramrod of an officer among them. He saw Joey, bandaged and rubbing a second bump above his ear, standing beside the older woman in the doorway to the rest of the house. Dimly, he heard words passing between one and other of them. Strange words.

"Gad, ma'am!" the stiff young officer breathed as the light came up, "a slaughterhouse! And this wild bull that we took out of commission the only one that's left! We've been trailing Collier for ten days. And if we'd stopped to water our horses at the last creek, we'd have been too late!"

Joey grinned and shook his head and jerked his hand toward Sam.

"That's twice you're wrong, Lieutenant," he said solemnly. "You'd not have been too late. It was all over with and done when you got here. I was on the floor through it all, and I know. And this man is no guerilla!"

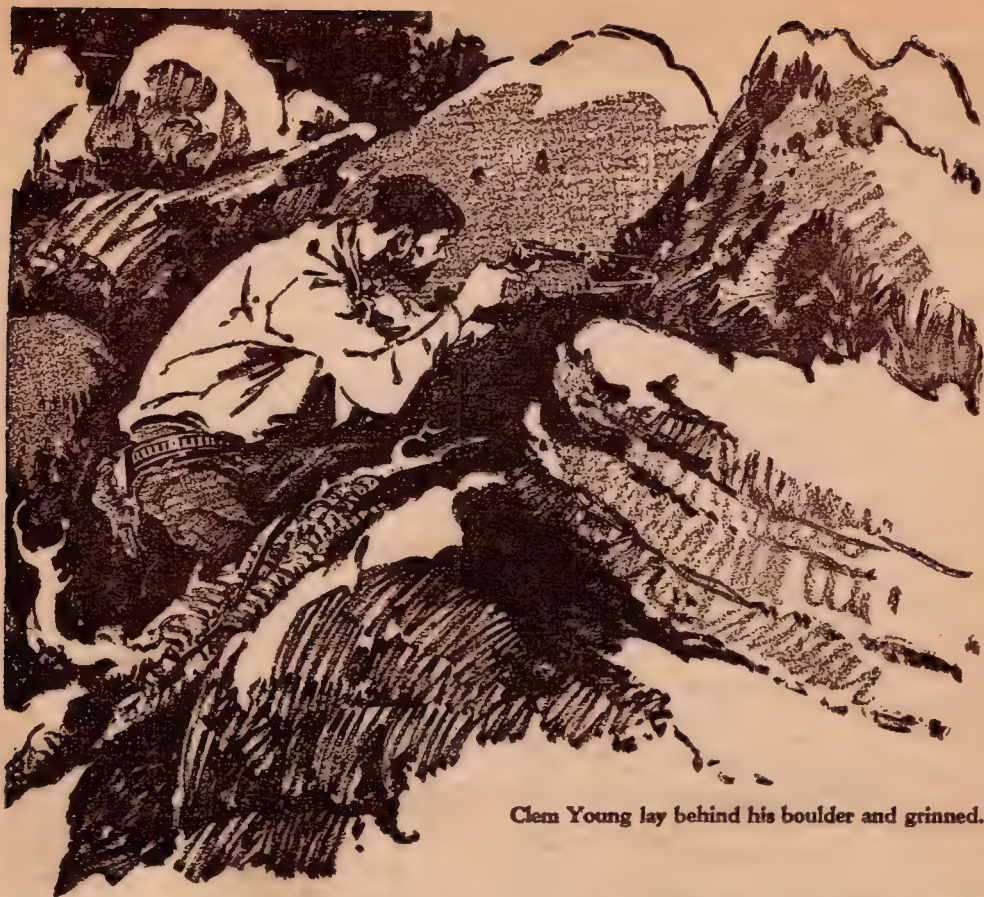
The officer scowled as though he was displeased at being robbed the honor of rescue by a renegade. His face was almost ugly.

"Quite so, then," he snapped. "But this tramp is a mustered-out infantryman. He's still wearing the rags of his uniform. So we'll take him in. Orders, you know—to round them all up!"

The older woman smiled and moved out of the doorway toward Big Sam's weaving figure.

"Without a warrant, Lieutenant?" she asked mildly. "Now, I don't think so, at all! You see, this man works with us . . . Could we heat some coffee for your men before you go?"





Clem Young lay behind his boulder and grinned.

GUNSMOKE WISDOM

By DAVE SANDS

Two men who lived by their guns—one a sheriff who always got what he went after and the other an arrogant, cold-blooded killer—faced each other across fifty yards of mountain slope. And each of them wagered his life on his knowledge of shooting irons—and the men behind them!

OLD BAILEY stood behind a gnarled oak tree on the mountain-side, the star on his vest occasionally reflecting a glitter of sunlight. Fifty yards below him lay Clem Young, reasonably safe behind a granite boulder. Clem had built a right smart rep for being a quick thinker during the record of robberies and assorted hell-raising he had piled up in a surprisingly short time. Right

now he was enjoying this game of hide-and-seek with Bailey. He wasn't worrying about his chances with the old codger.

"Now listen, son," Sheriff Bailey shouted. "You ain't got a chance to git away, so there ain't no use in gittin' yoreself killed tryin' it. You better use a little sense and come out from behind thar with yore hands h'isted, like a sensible person."

Clem Young jeered. "Why don't you

come an' git me? You got a rep fer bringin' folks in alive; ain't you? Never kilt a man in twenty years o' sheriffin'?"

"There's always got to be a first time," Old Bailey called. "An' I'd hate to start with a kid jist out o' didies."

"Then come an' git me alive. 'Cause I ain't bein' took by no ol' fossil like you."

Knowing he was safe as long as he kept his head down behind the boulder, the young outlaw poured out his scorn. "You ought to be in a wheel-chair instead o' loose in these woods," he shouted. "Why don't you come an' git me? I'll tell you why!"

"Yeah?" the old sheriff returned. "Why?"

"Because when you heard the shootin', you just grabbed up yore Winchester an' come a-runnin'—without no cartridge belt. You done shot up three of the five shells yore gun will hold, so—you just got two left, an' have to go home empty."

"Or get murdered with an empty gun in my hand," the sheriff finished.

"That's your hard luck. You didn't have to follow me."

"Yes, I did. You killed that bartender you robbed back in town in as cold-blooded a murder as I ever seen," the sheriff answered. "Are you comin' out—or am I comin' to git you? This is yore last chance."

Clem Young lay behind his boulder and grinned. With the toe of his boot he dragged a dried twig to within his arm's reach, then picked his hat up from the ground and put it on the stick. It was an old trick, but he had plenty of ammunition, and the sheriff didn't. Maybe it would work. The old officer wasn't any too smart, anyway.

Slowly, he raised the hat over the top of the boulder, while he peered around the edge of the stone, his pistol aimed at the tree.

The sheriff's Winchester blasted the woods, and a bullet hole appeared in Young's hat.

But the sheriff's arms and the side of his face had been exposed for a fraction of a second, and in that short time Clem Young's gun had barked. Clem grinned as he saw a fleck of blood on the sheriff's cheek.

He ducked back and shouted from the

safety of his rock fort, "We're both good, ain't we, Sheriff? You plumb ruined a twenty-dollar Stetson. But you ain't got as much ear as you had a minute ago, have you?"

The sheriff did not answer. The youthful bandit grinned and made another short mark on the ground with his finger. These were the marks he had made to be sure to keep accurate count of the shots the sheriff had fired, and now there were four of them. One more shot and the sheriff's gun would be empty. Then the game would be over.

Clem yelled at Bailey again. "You done pretty good," he said. "An inch lower in my hat an' you'd have got me in the head."

It was too easy. Imagine an officer of the law falling for that old trick! A man that dumb didn't have a chance in the world of catching him! Well, old dogs can't learn new tricks.

Once again he stretched out behind his rock so that he could shoot from the side of the boulder as he raised the hat a couple of feet away and over the top of the stone.

"All right, Sheriff," he yelled. "Look out, 'cause I'm gonna shoot yore other ear off to match the first one."

By sticking the twig with the hat resting on top of it into the strap of his boot, and raising his leg back of the stone, he elevated the hat until it was within sight of the sheriff behind his tree.

The sheriff's rifle roared—and cut the twig in half!

Clem Young's pistol barked its echo, and the youthful badman saw the sheriff's hat jump off his head and land in a briar patch back of him.

"Mighty good shootin'," he yelled derisively at the officer. "But what you gonna do now—with a empty gun?"

Clem Young was feeling great, and his voice rose in taunting curses—now that the sheriff had fired his five shots. "Well, this game's gittin' kinda stale. Why don't you come an' git me? It's gonna be dark soon."

"I *am* comin'! But I'm sorry you wouldn't give up peaceable an' in good health."

The old man stepped out from behind his tree. His heavy boots scruffed along between the rocks as he walked directly

toward the boulder behind which the young bandit hid.

The boy had stuffed new shells into the cylinder of his pistol, reloading all around, when he suddenly heard the sheriff's footsteps.

"Why, the damned fool!" he gritted. "Just beggin' to be salivated."

He looked out from behind the boulder, saw the sheriff's gray head as the old man plodded toward him, a target nobody could miss.

Bailey didn't even have his empty rifle at his shoulder, but carried it in his hand at his side.



A HARD smile came into Young's face as he hefted his Colt. He got his legs up under him, then stood up suddenly, the lust of a youth who had tasted blood burning in his eyes. Here was the kind of meat he liked, wide open and practically unarmed. His face went into a vicious grin.

"All right, you old fool, you asked for it," he gritted. "I'm one hombre you won't bring in alive—or dead! How's this fer shootin', you string-haltered ol' cripple?"

He took slow, careful aim, raising his pistol barrel up and bringing it down slowly on the target. He couldn't miss. The sheriff hadn't even raised his own useless rifle from where it hung in his hand by his belt.

Slowly the stringy-gray hair of the sheriff's head showed over his sights, then the seamed forehead, the wrinkled old eyes, the calm chin. . . . *Better get him in the belly and make sure.*

The sheriff's neck was in the sights, his chest.

Suddenly a roaring blackness engulfed the youth. He found himself lying on his back, half against the rock, his boots kicking in the soft earth. He saw that he had kicked up a wild violet, and it looked queer, all green and purple, and there were a lot of violets around where he was lying, and they were splashed with blood. That was funny—he hadn't noticed the violets until now. And how come that blood scattered all around? Strange! He

felt confused. He couldn't figure why he was lying on the ground. His right arm felt benumbed. He tried to tighten the fingers of his right hand on his gun.

He had the sensation of tightening them, but couldn't feel the gun-butt. The gun should have been in his hand. He looked for it, his mind still in confusion as to what had happened.

But he didn't *have* a right hand! He just had a bloody little finger dangling from a piece of loose flesh. That was queer. His hand had suddenly been blown off, but he could still feel his finger muscles as he went through the motions of opening and closing a missing hand.

Who was that talking? He looked up, and the man speaking was a blurred vision for a long moment before it became the form of the old sheriff.

"Now, son, we'll put a tourniquet on yore arm before we start to town," old Bailey said gently. "Just sit on that stump an' I'll have yuh fixed up in a minute."

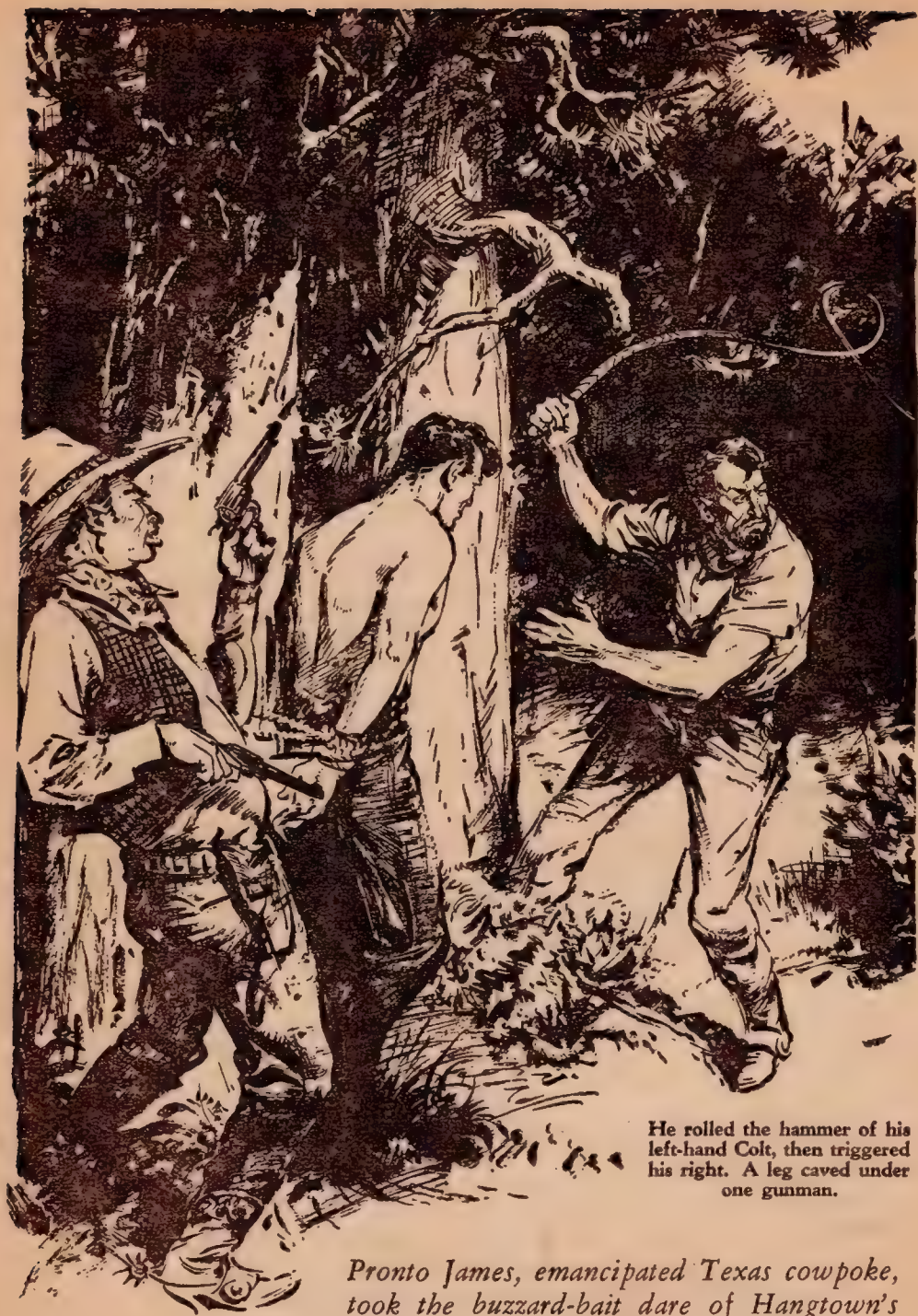
In bewilderment, Clem Young asked, "But yore rifle was empty. I counted the shots."

"Shore, you told me you knew I only had five shells," Bailey answered. "What you didn't know was that I carry a vest pocket full of extra shells—just in case I don't bring my cartridge belt. I put another shell in the magazine every time I fired, so it never was empty. I knowed that you'd figger my gun was empty, so you'd stand up an' take plenty time aimin' at me, and I wanted that extra time myself, so's I could disarm you without killin' you. I was afraid I was a little rusty shootin' a rifle from the hip. My eyes ain't what they was."

Clem Young groaned. "You ain't so smart—you fell for that hat trick."

The sheriff was twisting his knotted handkerchief around the seated youth's wrist with a stick. He laughed softly.

"I just did that to help you count my shots. The trouble with you young pups is that you just learn half the game. You can't just figger a man's gun is empty. You got to know it. An' the likes o' you never learn till it's too late. Old dogs might not learn new tricks, but they generally know more angles to the old tricks than a pup does."



He rolled the hammer of his left-hand Colt, then triggered his right. A leg caved under one gunman.

Pronto James, emancipated Texas cowpoke, took the buzzard-bait dare of Hangtown's has-been miners to win a golden fortune the hard way, and be damned to a gringo renegade army, the Sierra torture chieftain—and even the deadly ghost that guarded the yellow bullion lode in the ancient Spanish stronghold of Mil Diablos!



THE GHOST OF SATAN'S RANCHO

A novelette-length saga of high Sierra warriors

By M. HOWARD LANE

CHAPTER ONE

Devil Creek Discovery

WINCHESTER lead thudded with fateful finality into the bark of the big yellow pine alongside him, and Pronto Joe James ducked his Stet-

soned head instinctively and continued at a heavy-footed run along the banks of Devil's Creek. The pound of blood in his ears was so heavy he could hardly hear the report that followed the searching rifle shot. Yet it seemed that the sound was nearer than it had been before.

Ahead of the fleeing man loomed a

sharp bend in Devil's Creek, and Pronto Joe set it for his goal. "Git yourself around that corner, you lunk-eared hunk," he told himself, "and mebbe you'll find some hole you can pull in after you. If you don't you're going to be first rate cougar-bait right soon!"

Every last one of these words was true. Truer still was the galling knowledge that if he did find a hiding place it would only prolong matters. With blood dribbling from a flesh wound in his shoulder, a night in the chilling cold of these high California Sierras would kill him.

"The wust of it is you got nobody but your own bull-headed self to blame for being in this jackpot," he added savagely. "Those hombres in Placerville told you what to expect in this damned Satan's Rim country."

That, too, was the truth.

In the Hangtown General Store, where he had stopped to pick up supplies, grizzled veterans of many a Sierra prospect had looked with secret amusement at the stub-bodied stranger in the big hat and high-heeled boots. His face was saddle leather brown; he was probably twenty five or six years old, though he looked older. Sun and wind had put lines about his gray eyes and wide mouth.

"Sure, there's gold in them mountains," one graybeard prospector had drawled. "But I misdoubt if it's to be found by a feller who looks like he'd be more at home chousin' dogies along a trail."

Pronto had taken no offense. "Me," he'd told them in the same light vein, "I'm an emancipated cowpoke. I've et my last trail-dust. That's why I decided to come to Californy. Diggin' gold can't be no tougher than ridin' out a stampede on a rainy night—and it might be more profitable!"

The loungers about the store had eyed the pair of capable Colts at Pronto's thighs, and then almost of one accord they nodded.

Their spokesman went on orating. "James," he had said soberly, "we uns can tell you where there might be a peck of gold—for a man with the guts and guns to get it."

Pronto had held his tongue. Right now, with the blood leaking down over his ribs,

he wished that he had told them to keep the kind of gold that demanded guts and guns instead of a gold pan.

Instead, he had listened.

"Out yonder"—the prospector had waved at a tangle of peaks beyond the nearer pine-clad mountains—"lies Satan's Rim and *Rancho Mil Diablos*. You git there by ridin' along the American to Devil's Creek, and then p'intin' your nose up its bosque. The place belongs to old Don Luis y Vargas Cordoba. The last Spanish governor of California granted him the land. He lives in a big hacienda back at the headwaters of Devil's Creek, and runs wild cattle and sheep. When he comes down from the mountains he always carries a poke full of gold, and folks find him right sociable—long as they don't talk about the Lost Padre Mine, where some figger he gets his *oro*.

"Come lately a cuss calling himself Scar Bronson has thrown the whole rancho into court by claimin' he holds a prior grant. Hear tell both sides done a lot of testifyin' and that the jedge of the Land Court has taken the whole thing under advisement.

"Now, I happen tuh have been up the American t'other day, and I saw me a big, scar-faced jasper, and about fifteen other fellers, moseyin' along the river. They didn't have no prospectin' gear," he added significantly. "So it seems like mebbe if a young gent with useful guns was to go and offer his services to old Don Luis he might come out with a poke of gold for a prize."



PRONTO had thought so too. Now he was about convinced that instead of fighting pay in his pocket he'd have a load of dirt a-top him.

Ahead, as he rounded the point that had been his goal, lay a narrow, grassy meadow, and across it loomed an even longer granite ridge that stretched like a giant finger down into the creek itself. White water boiled around the tip of the finger. A man in his condition would be swept off his feet and drowned if he tried to circle that way.

There was only one thing he could do, Pronto decided, as he plodded at a stum-

bling run across the meadow. That was to climb to the sloping top of the granite ridge, and hold off his pursuers as long as ammunition and strength lasted.

The outfit behind him had hit his camp that dawn, just as he had rolled out of his blankets. Only a big dead log against which he had banked his fire for the night had saved him from quick death. Pronto had dived behind it, and with a crooked limb had snaked his belted sixguns from beneath his saddle.

With lead howling viciously about him, he had managed to make shelter in the snow brush bordering Devil's Creek. Not once had he gotten a sight of his attackers, who were doing their shooting from the thick, pine-clad walls of the canyon.

He had headed up-stream on the hunch that the killer crew might expect him to go the opposite way. For a while his move had confused pursuit. Then they had sighted him crossing a little opening, and long-distance lead had drilled him through the shoulder. He had wadded his neckerchief into a pad beneath his shirt, and it had helped staunch the blood, but even so Pronto could feel it still dribbling down his ribs.

He was across the meadow now, and the looming granite ridge looked a mile high. Boulders, like fangs, jutted up from a carpet of brown pine needles which had blown down from higher levels. Pronto looked at the carpet of needles and grunted. Unless a man could dig through to solid footing they would be as slippery as glare ice.

"Looks like you're going to make your stand right here, amigo," Pronto told himself. "Leastways you'll live long enough to get a look at them hombres trailin' you—and mebbe a chance to take yourself some company to hell."

His eyes searched both ways for a good boulder to hide behind; then he saw the trail. It was just a path, a few yards to the left. Horses had traveled this way, and their sharp hoofs had cut through the treacherous layer of pine needles.

Once more Pronto looked up at the finger-like ridge. He grinned crookedly. The top of it would make a mighty nice little fortress—if he could make it!

Waves of dizziness started coming before he was half way to the summit.

His laboring lungs pumped and pumped thin air, and couldn't get enough. That was why, when he did reach the crest of the trail, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. His reaction to what he saw was more instinctive than anything else. He dropped to his stomach, and yanked off his sombrero. Then he raised his head for another look. By this time his heart had quit some of its pounding.

The granite finger sloped steeply to a mile-wide plateau above Devil's Creek. Giant old yellow pines, towering straight up for three hundred feet, grew in clumps about the plateau. At the edge of the clump nearest him were four ground-hitched saddle horses, and beyond them, beneath one of the big trees, were their riders. Three were big men with braces of Colts holstered at their hips. The fourth. . . .

Pronto Joe blinked again to be sure that he was seeing straight. The fourth was a tall, rangy youth, his naked torso glistening like golden satin. His back was against the rough bark of the pine, and his arms were spread behind him. Ropes, fastened to pegs driven into the tree, held his wrists. His ankles were anchored in the same fashion.

To a man almost straight from the great cattle trails of the Southwest, this was something incredible. A scene like it belonged in an Apache stronghold in the mountains of Arizona, where wild devils still tortured people when they got the chance.

Pronto caught a glimpse of a black-bearded face as one of the men turned and slipped a heavy, six-foot braided whip from about his saddle horn. The hombre was a gringo, and he was going to give that young Spanish fellow a taste of damnation.

"But not if I can help it!" Pronto muttered.

CHAPTER TWO

Chamber of Gold

AS ANOTHER of the men moved to one side to give the whip-master room, Pronto got a better look at the youngster. He was about twenty.

A clean-cut, black-haired boy, with dark, patrician features. Those prospectors in Hangtown had mentioned no scion of the Cordoba family, but as he studied the youth, Pronto knew that he was looking at a Cordoba just the same.

James climbed to his knees—and he saw the pinioned youth's head jerk with surprise. Cursing under his breath, the stubby cowpoke dragged his Colts. The movement of the boy's head had warned the trio. They came around in a spread, fingers jabbing for weapons. They were asking no quarter, and Pronto was perfectly willing to give none. He had little use for hombres who took whips to other folks.

Spraddle-legged, he stood there, a short, chunky figure, his old hat squarely on his head, a grin on his lips. He rolled the hammer of his left-hand Colt, then triggered his right. A leg caved under one gunman. The whip-master howled and dropped one gun to clamp a hand to his shoulder. The third had his weapons clear of leather now. Lead came crying up the slope, but the bullets struck low, puffing granite dust against the legs of Pronto's levis.

All the anger at the treacherous attack which had met him on Devil's Creek this morning steadied Pronto's aim. His lead caught the gunslinger full in the chest and drove him backward like the blow of a battering ram. The man was dead as he fell. It was too much for the whip artist and his wounded companion. Together they turned and raced for cover in the grove behind the tied boy.

"No, you ain't goin' in there to pot at us when we pull out," Pronto muttered. He hammered the fleeing pair with lead; he kept firing until they were beyond sixgun range.

Thumbing fresh loads into his Colts, Pronto moved down the slope. It was a funny thing, but this fight had brought the spring back to his muscles. "One thing about it," he told himself grimly, as he approached the boy, "I've shore shown this younker that I might be handy to have around!"

The youth had courage. He smiled at Pronto, and his dark eyes approved the stocky sandy-haired cowpoke. "Señor," he said, "Satan's Rim is becoming crowded

with strangers, but none more welcome than you."

"I may be welcome"—Pronto was already at work with his clasp knife on the thongs—"but we ain't going to be very happy after that bunch who've been trailing me all morning hear those shots and catch up with us. That is, unless they're some of your dad's vaqueros." Pronto added the last apparently as an afterthought, though he was watching the youth closely.

The Spaniard's reaction was surprising. He had not quailed at sight of a whip or the danger of stray lead, but now his flat cheeks turned ashen.

"*Mi padre*," he said in a low voice as he stepped clear of the tree, "is dead!"

Pronto stiffened with surprise. "You mean Don Luis?" he managed to ask.

"Si," the Spaniard said. "I am Castro Cordoba, his son. And you?"

"Me," Pronto said slowly, "I'm a damned fool who should have stayed in Kansas! You can call me James."

The young don nodded. He swung aboard one of the horses, a fine black. Pronto chose a bay with good lines. As he hit leather, he heard the clank of shod hoofs on granite. The sound had come from the ridge.

"Let's move, Cordoba!" he snapped. "Low in your saddle, amigo!"

Lead smashed down at them from the crest behind them. The Spaniard slammed heels into his mount's flanks. He was, Pronto saw, starting straight along the open length of the plateau.

"This way, damn it!" he yelled savagely. "Into the grove!" He jerked a Winchester from the boot of the saddled mount he had borrowed and gave the horse free rein.

Riders were pouring down this side of the ridge. Pronto saw them as he twisted in the saddle, and brought the rifle to his shoulder. He fired, and watched the lead kick dust in front of the avalanching pursuers. The recoil of the rifle almost nauseated him as pain from his wounded shoulder jabbed through his body.

"Once more," Pronto muttered. "To hell with your shoulder!" He aimed higher this time. Through powdersmoke, he saw the lead horse trip and come somersaulting down the slope. Its rider

left the saddle like a stone from a sling. The next horseman crashed into the falling animal before he could halt, and so did the one following.



THAT was all Pronto had the chance to see, for his bay was following Cordoba's black into the shadows beneath the tall pines. The Spaniard kept the lead and Pronto trailed him, his brain working rapidly. The news of Don Luis' death was a blow. Had he been killed by that bunch of *buscaderos* behind them or had death come from natural causes?

Disgustedly, Pronto quit asking himself questions. He was certain of only one thing. He had bought cards in a bitter game of blood and death, and he was going to play the hand to the last shell in his gunbelt.

Castro Cordoba circled the edge of the plateau at a fast run. The ridge ahead was higher than any of those behind. Pine-cloaked, it would offer excellent shelter in case a running battle developed.

However, a glance across his shoulder showed the Kansas cowpoke that pursuit was halted temporarily. The two men he had wounded were limping toward the group circled at the opposite edge of the flat. It looked as though they were about to hold a war council.

Pronto tried to count them, but their figures grew hazy before his eyes. He shook his head irritably, and only a lucky stab at the saddle horn saved him from pitching overboard.

From a dim distance, he heard a voice say, "Señor, what a fool I am! You are wounded!"

"Nothin'," Pronto said. "It's nothin'. Let's get on."

But suddenly he found himself on the springy needles beneath a giant pine; there was a flask at his lips. By the taste, its contents were blood-warming brandy. Then he felt the Spaniard's fingers at his shoulder. They were deft as a doctor's.

"Some surgery I learned at the College of St. Augustus in *El Pueblo de los Santa Barbara*," Castro talked soothingly as he worked. "It comes in handy now. No bones are broken, señor," he reported. "The wound is clean. Soon you will be

troubled by nothing but a little stiffness. Then, poof—that will be gone."

"Which'll leave me feeling fit to take a hand in the game you're buckin'," Pronto said, without opening his eyes. "Cards was dealt me this morning by them *buscaderos* behind us. They jumped me in my camp down Devil's Creek. I was on my way here," he explained, "to see if your dad could mebbe use a gent who knew a heap sight mōre about handlin' Colts than a gold pan."

"He cannot use you," Castro Cordoba said somberly. "But *I* can. However, after I finish telling you of what is happening here, you may wish to go the other way!"

Pronto opened one eye and grunted. "When gents," he said sententiously, "start shootin' at me without no reason, and when they get out blacksnakes to whip folks, I usually hang around until the scores are evened."

Cordoba nodded. "Those men who attacked you belong to this *cabrone*, Scar Bronson, who is trying to rob us, through the courts, of *Rancho Mil Diablos*."

Pronto chuckled. "It don't look to me like he's waitin' for the courts!"

"That is right, señor," Castro agreed. "Too late now we understand that. He is planning to take the rancho by force, but unless he learns the secret he seeks it will do his greedy heart little good."

"You mean this Lost Padre Mine?" Pronto suggested. "Them jaspers in Hangtown hinted that that might be the reason he wanted Satan's Rim."

The Spaniard's eyes glowed for an instant. "They want what was the treasure of the padres," he said flatly. "They seek the Chamber of Gold."

"Whoa!" Pronto sat up. He found his hat and jammed it on the back of his head. "Them cusses in Hangtown didn't mention anything like that to me."

"The Cordobas do not tell the world all they know," Castro said quietly. "It was to make me give them the secret of the Chamber of *Oro* that these Bronson men brought me here to be whipped. They captured me as I was riding the creek this morning."

"But the whippin' would have been wasted, because you don't know where the gold is yourself," Pronto said slowly.

"That is right, señor," the Spaniard said slowly. "To me, the Lost Padre mine and Chamber of Gold have never been more than a legend oft told by my father. This mine was opened by Sierra Indios long before the coming of white men. Conquistadores and Mission Fathers, though it is not common knowledge, came to these peaks with the Indios and developed the mine. Those great artisans, the padres, built the hacienda where we now live.

"Then came a time of revolt, the power of the missions melted and the Indios drove the Spaniard from these mountains before they could take their gold with them. That is how these peaks came by their name, Satan's Rim, for here, the padres swore, was the last stronghold of the Devil.

"For a hundred years or more," Castro continued, "no man set foot into this country, and so the secret of the Chamber of Gold was lost. In ancient archives the Governor of California, Don Pio Pico, found record of this old Mission property, and granted it to my father, who was his friend. That is how it came into the family of the Cordobas."

"And now Bronson's trying to contest the grant," Pronto muttered thoughtfully. "No wonder!"

The story he had just heard was incredible, yet completely logical. Americans had a bad habit of dating the existence of California from the time when their flag had been raised over the land. They failed to consider the ancient civilizations that had lived here before their coming.

And that is not all, Señor James," the young Spaniard said. "I must tell you the truth. This Bronson can hardly fail to conquer the rancho. He has many men and I have but three old mozos to help me defend it. Three mozos—and the Ghost of *Mil Diablos*!"

"Whoa!" Pronto ejaculated again. "What the hell!"

"Si!" Castro's face was completely serious. "This ghost is the one who has told me of my father's death."

Pronto had climbed to his feet. He looked at Cordoba, and a crooked grin bent his lips. "Fella," he drawled, "I've swallowed a lot, but I'm damned if I'll accept a talkin' ghost!"

CHAPTER THREE

Sierra Buscaderos

CASTRO CORDOBA shrugged. "We can talk about that," he suggested, "as we ride. It is only a few miles from here to the rancho. As for the ghost of *Mil Diablos*, señor, it has not spoken to me. But I get ahead of my story."

"You sure do," Pronto grunted. "Go back and start over."

"Since childhood," the young Spaniard began, as they started to move, "I have resided in Santa Barbara. When this Bronson claimed he held prior title to *Rancho Mil Diablos* I returned to plead our case. His deeds to the rancho are forged, that we know. But he is clever. Perhaps the courts will look with favor on the Americano instead of we Californios. *Quien sabe* to that. However, as you can see now, I have not been here at the rancho long enough to know much about this ghost. My first experience came in the night on the day before yesterday. I heard a cry, and hurried from my room in the casa . . ."

Pronto was watching the youth narrowly as he talked, and he could see that the young don was deadly serious.

"I hurried into the hall, señor," Castro continued, "and it seemed to me that a black shadow beckoned me to follow. It led me to a great room in a wing of the hacienda we do not use. Señor, a wall opened there before the shadow and I followed old stairs downward to another stone-walled room. There—there, señor—I found blood on the floor, and my father's *botas*. One of them weighted this note."

Dried blood made a rusty stain across a corner of the slip of paper Castro pulled from the pocket of his dark serge trousers.

Pronto took it with a queer sense of expectancy and studied the rude pencil scrawl.

Don Luis is dead. Scar Bronson killed him when he would not name the whereabouts of the Chamber of Gold. You, too, will die unless you leave the rancho!

The Ghost of *Mil Diablos*.

Pronto shook his Stetsoned head. "I've seen some damned queer things in my

time, but this beats all." He squinted at his companion. "You say this ghost led you to the place where you found your dad's boots and the blood?"

"Si," Castro nodded.

"Then disappeared?"

"Si."

Pronto shook his head. "There's a lot here we don't understand," he said slowly, "but I ain't never yet heard of a h'ant writing letters. Let's you and me forget this ghost and say Bronson took your dad's body with him and left this note to scare you off the rancho."

Pronto watched the young Spaniard stiffen. "I will not leave Satan's Rim, Señor James," he said, quiet hardness in his voice, "until either Scar Bronson or I am dead!"

Their horses boosted themselves up the last steep slant, and for the space of a minute Pronto forgot everything but the sight that lay ahead. Shadows were filling Devil's Creek Canyon, but here the sun was still bright. A vast, green tableland lay in front of them, and at its far rim on a crag-like pinnacle, stood the hacienda. It looked incredibly huge, even against a back-drop of iron peaks. Red roofs glowed in the rays of the setting sun. The white walls seemed to gleam.

"God, that's enough to make a man sell his soul," Pronto muttered. "No wonder Bronson wants the place. Take a house like that, and add gold to the pot, and it's a wonder hell ain't bubbled over a lot sooner."

As he spoke he was studying the lay-out from the point of defense. Once they were inside the hacienda, no force could approach close enough by daylight to attack them. But with night coming on, it would be different. To properly guard the hacienda they'd need half a hundred men. Instead they had five, counting himself, Castro, and the three mozos young Cordoba had mentioned.

They started to climb the promontory by a trail that twisted upward between jagged granite boulders, and Pronto looked at his companion. "That h'ant," he said abruptly "had about the right idea, I think. We're all going to be Boot-hill-bait come night, if we stay here. Look at it this way, Cordoba. I've been tryin' to figger out why I was jumped that way

this morning ever since it happened.

"Now, I think I've got the answer. Bronson tried to take my taw because he figured I was a messenger from Sacramento, bringing you word that you'd won the trial. That's also the reason he's moved in on you so sudden. He's aimin' to take by force what he couldn't win legal.

"And here's what I'm thinkin'." Pronto's homely face was devoid of humor now. "You can't lose much by lettin' him have the hacienda for a while. It's easy to figger that he didn't learn where this lost *oro* is from your dad, or his hombres wouldn't have planned a whippin' for you."

"So, if my hunch about yore winnin' the trial is right, we could head for Sacramento and bring back the law to repossess the rancho. That's the sensible way to keep your scalp."

Something that droned like an angry bee passed directly between them. A moment later the high peaks were ringing with the rifle's report. The shot had come from the high ridge they had crossed not many minutes before.

Castro Cordoba looked at Pronto Joe and a thin, slightly ironic smile touched his lips. "Your advice, Señor James, is sensible, but Scar Bronson's is stronger! A man must cross that ridge to descend Devil's Canyon. I am afraid we will have to stay and fight!"

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"AND that's the truth," Pronto grunted as he lifted the bay under him into a scrambling run up the last steep twist in the trail. Inwardly he was almost glad that Bronson had tipped his hand. All the talk he'd made to Cordoba had been for the young Spaniard's benefit. Getting out of this tight was the sensible thing to do. However, running from trouble had never been one of Brother James's virtues. He'd bought chips in this game and they'd likely turn into lead.

Sharp-eyed he studied the lay-out of the ranch plant as they raced their mounts into a courtyard. The courtyard was a good hundred yards long, by fifty wide. Out-buildings of log and stone roughly squared the court. One of the buildings was evi-

dently a wood house. Cords of split pine, long enough to fit a giant fireplace, were stacked along its walls.

"Welcome to *Rancho Mil Diablos*, Señor James," Castro Cordoba said. "At another time I would hope to make your visit more pleasant."

Pronto didn't answer. He had reined the bay to a halt in the center of the courtyard, and his eyes were busy. The hacienda itself was two stories high, built in Mission style. A long, arcaded gallery faced this yard.

"Could Bronson bring his crew in from the other side, Castro?" he asked abruptly.

"It would not be easy, señor. The casa," he explained, "is built like the three-sided box, with a patio in the center. The open end of it looks straight into the gorge of *El Diablo Canyon* and no man could enter that way. The opposite wing, which you cannot see from here, forms the third side. It stands on the lip of the promontory. There are but slits for windows in its lower floor, and no doors in the outer wall."

"Which means he'll have to cross this yard to take the house," Pronto pursed his lips. "That helps a little."

"Only they will come in the dark, señor, and we will not be able to see them. There is no moon tonight," he ended sorrowfully, "and when the night falls here it is black as the inside of a goat."

"Which might not work out as bad as it sounds," Pronto had his eyes on the wood house again as he spoke. Suddenly hope began to gleam in them. "What kind of lamps you got in the house?" he asked crisply.

"We have the modern kerosene," Castro said, and looked puzzled. "But I do not see—"

"You will in a minute," Pronto clipped. "Where's those vaqueros of yours?"

"In the upper rooms of the hacienda, with rifles ready for any Bronson *ladrones* who might dare enter this yard!"

"Call 'em down here," Pronto directed. "I want them to line each side of the courtyard with piles of that wood you've got corded up there. Three to a side ought to be enough. When they finish that chore we'll douse each pile with about five gallons of kerosene, if you've got

enough of the damn stuff on hand."

"We have plenty señor, but—" The young don was still puzzled.

Pronto met his mystification with a crooked smile. "We're going to make our own moonlight tonight, amigo—and go it one better, because this light of ours ain't going to shine until we're ready."

"*Por dios*," Castro whispered. "I begin to see. We will set the piles of wood on fire."

"When we get Mr. Scar Bronson and his *buscaderos* right smack in the middle of the yard," Pronto agreed. "With oil on the logs they'll burn fast and bright. They'll give us shootin' light. Each one of us will have a pile to start. In between the fires we'll stack a few more logs. May be a mite warm, hidin' between two fires, but it won't be half as hot as where we'll go if Bronson has his way about it!"

The young Spaniard's dark eyes had started to shine. Excitement marked his face and voice when he spoke. "*Madre di dios*," he exclaimed, "it is wonderful to have a fighting man to take the rancho's part! I would never have thought of this plan myself. And the blessed dark will hide our trap until we are ready to spring it. Señor, I should have spoken of this sooner, but now while there is still time I will tell you that if we win through this trouble, half of all *Mil Diablos* will be yours—yes, even to the Chamber of Gold!"

Pronto couldn't keep the grin from his lips. "How about half of the ghost?" he asked.

There was only one irremediable flaw in the plan of defense, and that was lack of manpower. Pronto was thinking about that three hours later as he hunkered behind one of the low log breastworks between the two piles of wood closest to the promontory trail. He cupped a cautious cigarette close to the palm of his hand, and shook his head.

There were just five of them. He had met and liked the three vaqueros. They were tough old Californios who had lived on the rancho a good share of their life; each of them was ready to sacrifice his life for the Cordobas. They would handle their share of the fighting, and so would young Castro. Each man was stationed now between two piles of logs he would

light. They needed all those fires to keep Bronson's men from finding an avenue into darkness between the blazing pyres. The trouble was that it left the hacienda empty.

"One hombre in a second-story window, pouring lead down on them Sierra *buscaderos* from the front, would sure discourage 'em from trying to rush through us and reach the gallery," Pronto muttered. "But, damn it, I guess we can't have everything—"

With the odds at five against fifteen, Pronto knew their biggest ally would be surprise. Then, as he looked through the intense dark of these high peaks toward the head of the promontory trail, he was the one who was surprised.

Horsemen were at the edge of the courtyard—a dark blurred mass of them!

He had counted on Bronson bringing his men up the trail on foot so as to avoid noise. Now he realized what had happened. Bronson's *buscaderos*, with the cunning of Indian raiders, had bound the hoofs of their mounts with canvas or burlap to muffle the sound of their approach. They had stripped them of gear that might creak. On bare-backed mounts now, the raider outfit was poised for a dash across the courtyard. It would take only seconds to reach the gallery. Pronto felt suddenly like a man with kings back to back seeing aces turned across the board.

It was too late now to shift a man to the *galleria* to plow lead into them from the front and thus slow their run. Nothing outside of God or a miracle could keep Bronson's crew from taking the hacienda.

"Ready!" He heard the word come out of the darkness—then the thunder of muffled hoofs.

There was no time now to light the oil-soaked tapers that were to set the pine pyres aflame. Pronto leaped to one of the piles and triggered his rifle at point-blank range against the saturated wood and crumpled paper at a corner of the pile.

Flame was licking upward to scorch his back as he pivoted toward the courtyard. Grimly he chambered and triggered lead into the massed men racing the length of the courtyard.

A horse fell before his bullets. The

rider of another rose in his stirrups, then pitched forward across his mount's neck. But it didn't stop the rest. Other guns were starting to talk from either side of the courtyard, and two of the *vaqueros* had managed to get their fires ablaze. Light was beginning to brighten the darkness, but it was slow—slower than horsemen on racing broncs.

Pronto dropped his hot gun when the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He had his twin Colts out of leather when something strange happened. The impossible. For a single second he felt every muscle in his body freeze.

There was a rifleman inside the hacienda, for muzzle flame was dancing suddenly from the dark frame of a second-story window!

CHAPTER FOUR

.30-30 Ghost

LEAD from the unknown gunster's weapon cut down the leading Bronson horseman like a scythe. Another rider piled into the falling mount before he could swerve.

Fires were blazing all about the courtyard now. From sides and rear and front, lead poured into the raiders. It was more than men and horseflesh could stand. Even while he thumbed fresh shells into the smoking cylinders of his Colts, Pronto saw them break and whirl. Low over the necks of their mounts, in a desperate effort to avoid death, they raced back the way they had come.

"To hell with Scar and his gold!" Pronto heard one man yell as they curved into the trail down from the promontory. "I'm damned if I'll die for either—"

Eight raiders lay dead; two more were dying. One horse with a broken leg was shot. Pronto finished it with a mercy bullet before moving to Castro Cordoba's side. The young don was swaying on his feet. He looked sick.

"*Madre di dios,*" he apologized. "I have never killed a man before."

Pronto smiled. "I don't feel so good myself," he said bleakly. "But you remember, Castro, they'd have killed you just as quick if they'd got the chance. And they'd have got it, too," he went on grim-

ly, his eyes sweeping the faces of the three vaqueros and Cordoba, "if somebody hadn't pulled an ace out of the kitty. They had the casa in their hands until that upstairs rifle changed the picture."

"It was the ghost of *Mil Diablos*," Castro said with certainty.

"Ghost be damned!" Pronto snapped. "I ain't never yet seen one trigger a .30-30!"

"Who else could it have been, Señor James?" a vaquero asked.

"Mebbe Don Luis," Pronto said between his teeth. "You found nothing but his boots, Castro, and that note."

"*Sil!*" A light of dawning hope was coming into the young don's eyes. "You think my father—"

"I don't know what to think!" Pronto snapped. "It's time to find out a few things while we got the chance. Come on, Castro. You and me will look around while your boys dig some graves. This thing ain't finished yet, by a long shot. None of these dead men is Bronson, by the look of them, and you can count on him being back—whether he's got *buscaderos* to side him or not. Gold"—some of the tension went out of Pronto's voice—"is funny stuff. It brought this Scar Bronson to Satan's Rim, and it's brought me. Seems like it's also brought this note-writin', gun-slingin' ghost."



WITH the young don in the lead, they mounted wide, tiled stairs to the second floor. Each carried a coal-oil lamp that drove back the shad-

ows. Cobwebs marked the heavy, hewn beams and festooned the white walls of the room into which Cordoba showed the way.

Pronto glanced around. A massive four-poster bed, a few chairs, a washstand and a huge mahogany wardrobe dresser that had probably come around the Horn by Clipper ship, furnished the room.

Otherwise it was empty save for a dozen or more cartridge cases scattered on the floor beneath the open casement window through which the unknown one's lead had traveled.

Pronto picked up a spent cartridge, stood looking at it. "So we are alone." Castro's voice had lost its hopeful note. "If the one who aided us had been my father he would not have vanished again. No, Señor James, I am afraid your hunch is wrong."

Pronto's stubborn jaw started to jut. "I may be wrong about your dad, but I ain't wrong about there being somebody else in this house!"

"It is the Ghost of *Mil Diablos*, señor."

"A friendly ghost, yeah!" Pronto Joe James had never been up against a situation quite like this before, and he didn't like it. His gray eyes were hard as drill bits as he looked at the young Spaniard.

"Mebbe I got another answer for it, and the time has come to do some proving. Your ghost showed yuh the way to a secret panel in the wing across the patio. That means said ghost knows more about this casa than you do. Mebbe this h'ant even knows where your Chamber of Gold is located.

(Continued on page 105)



Owlhooter's Election Day

By TOM ROAN

HE CAME into Wolf Bend alone, riding head down in the icy Wyoming wind, the swirl of the late fall's first snow, and the steadily increasing

cold. His horse was a shaggy, wall-eyed bay, a high-headed, roman-nosed brute with a mean cock to his ears. The man was old, lean and hard. He looked half-

With a rusty rifle, an old, soft-spoken drifter rode out of the Wyoming blizzard to pay a last call on three loyal, gallows-marked saddlemates—and prove to a bounty-hunting sheriff that the Old Katy Flier, kingpin outlaw of years gone by, was still a dangerous man!



"What in hell do you want back here?" snarled the sheriff. "You made your getaway—"

asleep, yet his keen gray eyes were like misty gems as they studied the crowds.

The cold wind gave him an excuse to keep his face buried in the upturned collar of his greasy old mackinaw. At every hand one saw six-shooters bristling, but there was no sign of a weapon about him except an old rifle hanging to the saddle of his horse.

He turned up a side street and found a stable for his bay at the end of the road. He paid for his animal's feed, and stood there beside him—a quiet-spoken, inoffensive man—while the bay finished his oats. That gave him a chance to study the other horses in the place. With expert eyes he noted what each horse was worth, his disposition and how fast and far he could travel.

"It seems," he ventured to the lanky stableman, "that there are heaps of folks in town for such a windy day."

"An' more comin'," nodded the stableman. "Yuh're lucky to get a stall for yore bronc. Don't yuh know what's goin' to happen come tomorrow mornin' at eleven o'clock? Sure, yuh must! A triple hangin' up at the jail, an' the first like it the Bend's ever had."

"Seems like I did hear somethin'." The stranger looked out the door and seemed to peer far out into the gathering shadows beginning to crawl around the feet of the surrounding hills. "When yuh get old yuh forget easy. Somebody said somethin'—somewhere now." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But I just forget."

"Well," grinned the stableman, "yuh are one of them odd old coots, ain't yuh? Sheriff Gotch McBride's wipin' out three fellas of the Old Katy Flier-Jack Morgan gang. Even got a kid of ten up there in the jail what they say is the Katy Flier's grandson. Holdin' him, hopin' the old man himself might dare to come in. Folks don't like Gotch keepin' that boy in jail, but Gotch is Gotch. Next election's right around the corner, too, an' he's made it already."

"I reckon I wouldn't know about that." The old man looked out the door again. "Bad fellas must meet their end sometime, I reckon. Say they'll hang, come mornin'?"

"At the eleventh stroke of the eleventh hour," answered the stableman. "Gotch is hell for what yuh call bein' dramatic. The

boy, of course, will be turned loose later. That is, he'll be sent to a reform school. He's got a dog I'd like to have. Big, husky, half-wolf-half-dog, yuh know. Lies outside the kid's jail window. Won't eat unless the kid drops 'im some of his grub. Gotch has started to shoot it three times. Would, but he figures he can auction it off after the hangin' an' maybe pick up twenty-five or thirty dollars for it. Get out in the crowd an' yo'll hear all about it. Don't cost nothin' to go to the hangin' tomorrow. Funeral's right afterwards on the hill behind the jail."

"I might go to the funeral." The old man smiled as he moved away. There was a little cafe down the street. He headed for it, and found a vacant table in a far corner, where the light was none too good.

A dozen men were eating in the place. All the talk was of the coming hanging. Three outlaws would pay for their sins when morning came. They were bad ones. Everybody agreed on that. They should have stayed in the Southwest if they had wanted to go on living. Up here they had been caught dead to rights for a cold-blooded killing. It would be the last for Tom Satterfield, Wells-Fargo Dave Lee and Texas Sam Goodnight. The infernal kid in jail with them was not much better. Mean little yap, some of the men said. Carrying a .32 sixgun at his age!

The law moved fast here. Within a week after the men were jailed Gotch McBride and Dude Gunsong, the sheriff's big deputy, had brought them to trial. All of them—even to the damned kid—had sworn that the sheriff was lying, but men of their stamp were like that. And of course the kid would say what they wanted him to say. One couldn't exactly blame the boy for that. He had been brought up with those men—those saddle hawks who had cut a hot trail for themselves in the Southwest under the leadership of the Old Katy Flier.

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DAKNESS had settled when he paid for his meal and strolled out. With him he carried a couple of extra big sandwiches in the pockets of his old mackinaw. In a napkin—unseen by the cook—he carried what he had not eaten

of his meal. A man got hungry sometimes late in the night. Old bones were not good for bouncing out of their blankets to go out and hunt up something.

He had heard a lot in the cafe. Men naturally liked to talk about outlaws. Each had seemed to take personal pride in the fact that Wolf Bend was going to have a triple hanging. It would set a record for the town.

The crowds jostled him. The milling mobs were everywhere. The wind had grown colder, stronger. More snow was coming now. Moonlight was beginning to break on the hard, ragged crests of the mountain chains in the east. It was not going to be a good night—not the kind of a night best suited to a man faced with a proposition that was almost too much for him to handle.

He found the combination courthouse and jail at the head of the street, and stood eyeing it from a safe distance. It was a big, three-story affair. The wind had driven most of the crowd away, but a mob of guards still filled the office. He strolled on, sometimes humming a half-forgotten song as people rubbed shoulders with him or brushed him from side to side.

Passing the jail, well to the western side of it, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that made him hold his breath for a moment. It was the dog, a big, black brute with his tail between his legs, standing against the wall under a cell window. There were men close to the dog, eyeing the animal in the darkness as the brute leered back at them with his wolfish snarl. When the men moved away a sigh of relief came from the old man.

Now he was getting above the dog, close to a little thicket of pines. When he entered the thicket and turned to look back the dog was staring at the pines and sniffing the air. Soon the dog was slinking away from the side of the jail. He entered the pines cautiously, not quite sure of himself but, dog-like, being forced to investigate the familiar scent that had come to him in the wind.

"King!" The man snapped his fingers. "*King!*"

The wolf-dog came forward, halting twenty feet away. The old man dropped to a squat. Again he snapped his fingers. The dog came closer, stopped, lifted one

foot and whined—a mournful sound. "King!" repeated the man. "Yuh old wolf!"

The dog moved closer, all wolf and wary now. His fighting fangs were bared. He rolled his head from side to side, then suddenly pushed forward, and the man caught him in his arms.

"Yeah, I know, King." For a moment the man's eyes seemed to glint with the strange mist that appeared to lie in their depths. "It's these sheepherder clothes I'm wearin' that makes the strange smell. An' yuh wasn't right sure, was yuh? No, an' sometimes even dogs have to be sure."

He fed the dog the meat from the napkin and the two sandwiches. As he arose to move away he took an old bandanna handkerchief from his pocket and dropped it on the ground.

"Stay with it," he ordered firmly but gently. "It'll keep yuh out of sight. *Stay here!*"

He moved away then, and the dog dropped to the ground on the handkerchief behind him. Hands behind his back, apparently just a harmless looking old man strolling along, he passed back by the jail. This time he was close to it. So close his humming voice would carry up to the windows. He heard feet move above him, quickly, almost silently. Hands were suddenly gripping the bars. A white face peered out in the night at him. His voice was still a sing-song hum when he spoke.

"*Be ready at midnight!*"



GOTCH McBRIDE and Dude Gun-song were nervous as midnight approached. Neither one knew why he was nervous, but both had sore right arms and hands. Handshaking could wear a man down. They had found that out. It had been a full day of it. Congratulations had come from almost every man who had ridden into town to see the hangings. Justice had once more triumphed under the sheriff's uncanny faculty of always getting his man!

A sheepherder had been found brutally murdered in his shack ten miles south of Wolf Bend. Six-shooter butts had hammered in his skull and he had been shot three times through the stomach. A man

known to keep large sums of money in his shack, old Hank Darby's death had inflamed the country from one end to the other. Everything about the shack had proved without a doubt that it had been murder for robbery. Gotch McBride and his deputy had investigated, called in almost a score of others to help them, and then had started looking for the killers and swearing to high heaven they would find them and bring them straight to justice.

It took men like Gotch McBride and Dude Gunsong to run down such a case. They knew how to keep quiet and never tip their hands until they were ready to make an arrest and charge a man—or even three men—with the job; and Tom Satterfield, Texas Sam Goodnight and Wells-Fargo Dave Lee had been made to order for just such a charge when they had come riding into town with the kid the afternoon of the funeral. They had no alibis that would hold water. Judge Bill Shugg and a hastily drawn jury had done the rest—and a judge and a sheriff had been assured of a coming election.

"I don't like this quiet," Dude Gunsong had closed the front door and the flat steel shutters over the windows. "A lot of people have sneaked out of town and gone home."

"It's the way of every hanging," McBride sat with his huge figure jammed into a chair behind his desk, ruddy face appearing to glow in the lamplight. "They lose their nerve, you might say. And we've lost one bet I thought we'd make." He glanced toward the corridor door leading to the cells. "I would have bet my life that the Katy Flier would have been here long before now, and the Katy Flier's worth a cool reward of ten thousand dollars—on his feet or dead and in a box."

The place had been full of guards, sworn in as extra deputies. In the quiet McBride had allowed the men to go down the street for a midnight sandwich and coffee. He thought it was one of them returning when footsteps sounded and spurs dragged on the porch. Then the door swung open, and it was only an old man with a saddle on his back.

"Good evenin', folks," he said as he closed the door. "Yuh know how it is in town, so chuck-full a man can't get a

place to sleep. I thought maybe yuh might—"

"No, you can't sleep here!" cut in McBride. "Get the hell out! This is no dump for bums!"

He paused, mouth sagging open, ruddy face becoming like a flame. A gasp of breath had come from Dude Gunsong. Out of the corner of his eye McBride saw his big deputy lifting his hands. His own hands started up, eyes widening, breath choked to a stop in his throat.

"One little move, an' it's death." The old man was no longer just an inoffensive tramp of the rangelands. His mackinaw had swung back, the saddle falling from his shoulder. In his gnarled hands were two long, shining .45's. Over the barrels the misty eyes were two gleaming little slits.

"Yuh been waitin' for the Katy Flier, an' he's here," the man was going on. "Here a-lookin' yuh in the eye, Mr. McBride, yuh cold-blooded, framin' snake. Turn, both of yuh! Put yore hands behind yuh. I ain't got long, though there is a sizeable fire down the street to keep folks interested for a while. I just sorter borrowed that saddle I used as a blind—after I'd got the fire goin' in the warehouse what's filled with hay. Turn, I said!"

McBride was having his own handcuffs snapped on his wrists a few seconds later. He heard Gunsong's chatter as the deputy's hands were locked behind his back. The jail keys were snatched up from the desk. It seemed that the corridor door of the jail was opened before a man could blink his eyes, and the sheriff and the deputy were shoved into it.

"Tom, Fargo, Tex!" called the old man gently. "On yore toes, boys. She's to be fast work from now on, though I guess we can hold the jail a spell if we have to. Where's Sonny?"

"Here I am, Grandpa!" called out the boy. "I heard you pass the window! I knew you wouldn't let none of us down!"

"Quiet, Sonny!" cautioned the old man, unlocking the doors. "Fan it, boys, an' get yoreselves a load of guns an' ammunition. Then it's out the back door an' to the stables with yuh, while I sorter gag these roosters a mite. We ain't got long. Might grab some extra blankets. She's cold out."

McBride could not speak. Cold perspiration covered him. He saw his three prisoners scurrying away to the office of the jail, heard them tearing into the gun lockers, snatching down belts, rifles, six-shooters and ammunition. In a flash they were back as the sheriff and his deputy were gagged and thrust into a cell and the lock turned in the door behind them.

They were just as quick at the stables in the rear of the jail. Soon McBride could hear horses slipping away in the darkness. That was all he did hear until he started kicking on the walls to raise the alarm.

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"HEAD for there." The old Katy Flier pointed to the northwest as he spoke in a guarded voice to Tom Satterfield. "Straight for the Crazy Walls. Don't worry 'bout me. I'll stick behind to throw 'em off the trail. . . . So long, Sonny!" He caught the boy for the first time and bear-hugged him. "If I get through an' don't overtake yuh I'll see yuh in Juarez. If I don't, boys, take care of Sonny. An' just one thing more."

He hurried on to where he had dropped his handkerchief. The dog was standing over it with his tail up. He picked up the handkerchief, gave the dog a shake by the lower jaw, and pushed him toward the riders filing away through the pines.

"Stick with 'em, King!" he ordered.

The dog bounded away. Again it was an old man slumping along with his hands behind him as the Katy Flier headed back down the street. Before he had gone far he could hear the *boom! boom! boom!* of feet kicking those reverberating steel walls of the jail.

"Oughta thought to tie their feet," he mused. "I must be gettin' old an' forgetful."

He still had the jail keys. He tossed them away in a weed-grown vacant lot, old eyes studying the excitement at the lower end of the town. Touching a match to the hay in the warehouse had started hell to popping. Now there was so much noise at the lower end of the street it might be a devil of a while before they heard the sheriff and his big deputy kicking the walls.

At the cafe in the side street he stopped and actually took time to drink a cup of coffee. It would be warming, riding in the wind, he reckoned. The place was deserted except for the cook, and the cook kept darting to the door to watch the fire.

"That fire's liable to burn down the town!" complained the crook. "It's a damned big 'un!"

"I know." The Katy Flier shoved back his cup and saucer, and carefully pushed a worn dime on the counter to pay for the coffee. "I know, because I started it. Easy, now!" His voice never lost its mildness. "I've got a gun on yuh, an' yuh're goin' with me for a short ride. Don't get fresh, an' yuh won't be hurt. I heard yuh braggin' in here tonight how yuh would like to meet the Katy Flier an' collect some reward money. Well, yuh're lookin' at 'im. Just walk along ahead of me. I want somebody, yuh see, to spread the report that I've decided to leave town."

They found the stableman when they reached the stables. There was no trouble with him, because he was not armed. The terrified cook could not speak, and the stableman was soon in the same fix. Then two other men came hurrying into the stables to see about their horses. The old



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man disarmed them at once—carefully.

"An' now yuh'll mount hosses with me," he ordered. "We aim to do some tall ridin'. Yuh'll ride, an' ride like hell. Yuh'll keep to the shadows. There'll be some gun-work, an' I don't want yuh to get shot."

They were pouring out of the stables a few moments later. By this time a great burst of excitement was taking place at the jail, showing that the break had been discovered at last. Herding his men in front of him and keeping them to the shadows, the old man suddenly started shooting in the air and yelling.

"The Katy Flier's leavin' town! *The Katy Flier's flyin'!*"

"Jail-break!" bawled a voice at the head of town. "*Jailbreak!* Kill anybody tryin' to get out of town!"

"There they go!" yelled another voice, the words punctuated by shots. "Headin' down the valley—an' goin' like hell!"

"That's good!" The Katy Flier grinned as bullets whistled around him. "Stretch out them hosses, fellas! This is one night when yuh'll know what it means to ride ahead of a posse comin' like hell on yore trail. *Burn the wind!*"



"THERE they go! There they go!" Swarming horsemen were on the trail.

With a bright moon in the sky the riders ahead could be plainly seen. The far-away pounding of hoofs reverberated like shots in the cold night air, and swarm after swarm of armed men were leaping their horses into the chase.

Bud Clarkson and Rube Floody, two of the extra deputies, had grown suspicious of the fire and had gone back to the jail. Dude Gunsong had managed to get the gag out of his mouth and had been yelling his head off when the men walked in. There were extra keys in the bottom drawer of the desk, and they had soon released the sheriff and the deputy to let them take charge of things.

"Get a gang and take the shortcut for the Crazy Walls!" roared the sheriff. "Never mind if they did head south. They'll switch back to the Crazy Walls, and we'll beat them on the shortcut and

be there ahead of them. It's their only way out, the only way they know I can't cut them off with the telegraph lines."

He was a man who could get things done when he started. He headed out with a posse to southward, knowing he was going to make the long switch-back. This country was all an open book to him. Only those damnable Crazy Walls in the north-west could tie a man up. Back there in that wild country outlaws were like pennies dropped in mid-ocean when it came to hunting for them.

Starting out as if he intended to kill the horse under him at once, he had gone down the valley but four miles when he saw jammed-up possemen ahead. Here the four men the Katy Flier had taken out of town had been released and their horses led on ahead, so that the men could not mount and follow him closely enough to balk his getaway.

"I climbed that tree over there!" cried the stableman. "I could see 'im after he'd gone on over that little ridge. He was swingin' to the left then, like he was headin' for Deadwood Canyon."

"This is a hell of a note!" snarled the sheriff. "Damn it, you men helped him get away by riding out of town with 'im and making the crowds think you were the prisoners. Why did you do that?"

"Because he had two big guns, that's why," answered the cook. "An' because I think yuh might have done just what we did if yuh had been in our boots, Gotch."

"Scatter out!" ordered the sheriff. "If he was swinging toward Deadwood Canyon, maybe he's got a fresh horse there at Hank Darby's old sheepherder shack. We'll keep straight on his trail, while the others I sent out block the Crazy Walls. When we drive him to the Walls we'll have them all together."

It was seven miles to the shack. They came in sight of it with their horses dripping. The canyon was like its name, filled with dead trees and brush, a desolate hole even in the moonlight. The warped boards of the shack showed down there beside a water hole, and when they rode up to the brush corral on the south side of it they saw the old man's tall bay, with saddle and bridle removed, standing not far away.

"Just what I thought!" exclaimed the sheriff. "That horse is hot and his back's

still wet. He had another fast horse waiting here— Look out, *scatter!*”

One of the possemen had dismounted in front of the shack. As he started to pull the door open the roar of a shotgun shook the night and filled the air over the man's head with birdshot and flying clouds of wood splinters.

“He's in there!” yelled the posseman as a second shot roared. “I saw 'im! I saw 'im in the center of the room!”

It would have been death for any living thing inside the shack during the next twenty minutes. A third and fourth roar of a shotgun sounded. A little window at one end of the shack came blasting out. Back and out of their saddles, the possemen poured one hail of lead after another into the shack.

“Let up!” Dude Gunsong was the first one to call a halt on it. “It's a flim-flam that old bird's pulled on us! There hasn't been but four shots come outa there.”

It took courage for a man to go forward, but Gunsong did it with a rush. At the door with a six-shooter ready, he jerked it open, and fired two shots into a bulky object in a chair in the center of the room. His shots at once caused another burst of shooting from around the shack, and it took McBride to curse that into silence.

“Told yuh it was a flim-flam!” cried the big deputy, when he had time to strike a match. “That's a sack of wool propped in a chair with one of Darby's old hats on it. Look at the old muzzle-loader shot-guns! Two of 'em fixed so that the openin' of the door would jar down weights an' start 'em to shootin'. The old bird was here sometime durin' the day, maybe for a day or two, while he figured this out an' rigged it up.”

“And he's gained time on us by it!” cried the sheriff. “All right, hit your saddles. He still has something to look forward to when he strikes the Crazy Walls!”



THE Katy Flier was going on, mounted on a tall chestnut-sorrel. He hoped he had held them at the shack for a little while, but there was still a world of work ahead of him. He knew it. This Wolf Bend region had at one time been an old stamping ground for him,

but it was dangerous rock-slide country ahead and he needed a lot of luck tonight.

Well in the lead of the sheriff's gang of possemen, and still holding his own, he heard bursting gunfire ahead of him three hours later. The air was bitter-cold. Sounds carried to a man here, with the wind against him, and when the Katy Flier got to where he could see a ragged V in a mile-high wall of cliffs ahead, he caught his first glimpse of the fight.

“Somethin' went wrong,” he muttered, reading all the signs by the flashing gunfire. “They're in a jam, caught halfway up the slope with a gang soon due to be hittin' us from behind.”

Satterfield and Goodnight cheered him when he came up. His one, long-drawn wolf wail had told them who it was back there in the moonlight and shadows. When he came up he found the boy holding the horses in a jackpine thicket where the rocks were tall around him. The dog was with the boy.

“Yuh come up the valley,” he told the others, after stopping to make sure the boy was still all right. “Yuh come the long way through. Six miles, maybe eight or even nine out of the way. We didn't fool Mr. McBride, an' that's all there is to it. Got to get out of this, boys. All hell's a-hossback behind us.”

“It looks pretty hopeless,” Lee was doleful. “Maybe we'll stretch them ropes yet, Katy.”

“Better men, I reckon,” nodded the old man, “have stretched 'em. Still, I ain't a dog to surrender my bone just because a lot of growlin's goin' on. How many men do yuh figure is ahead of us?”

“Twenty, maybe,” answered Satterfield. “The pass up there is full. But look here, Katy, there's one thing we want you to know before we go on. We didn't kill that sheepherder. We were framed. McBride had heard you had a hangout over in Idaho. He figured to make us drag yuh in. Put that deal up to us, promisin' to turn us loose if we'd work a trick on yuh. All he wanted was the reward on yuh.”

“An' wouldn't he be fooled!” The Katy Flier grinned. “I spent my time in the pen for robbin' the train that gimme that nickname. A month ago a sheriff friend of mine in Idaho wrote that sheriff in Texas who's had out the reward. He's

dead, an' the younger sheriff down there wrote back an' said to leave me be. There's still a reward, I guess, but nobody'd ever pay it or come after me. Hell, boys, that case is as good as closed!"

The one thing they could do here was to cut back along the side of the slope to southward. Low pines and tall rocks hid them from the men above them, and the men behind were not yet in sight. With the men above thinking they had them at bay, they moved away, knowing that every second counted now.

By moving as they did, they were actually following a broad ledge in the face of a wall of cliffs. It would never lead them to the top of the Crazy Walls, but they were a mile away when they heard horsemen pounding up from the direction the Katy Flier had come, and knew the sheriff was on the scene at last.

"Steady, Katy, yuh must be off yore trail!" warned Texas Sam Goodnight, when the ledge led them down into a narrow-walled little valley. "Hell, man, yo're headin' the wrong way!"

"I know," nodded the old man. "For a time it's our only chance. A rabbit or a wolf has sense enough to play this trick sometimes."



RAPIDLY increasing cold drove Gotch McBride and his men off the slopes two hours after dawn. The wind had increased into a howling gale, and the gale had become a blizzard blowing the loose snow down off the higher crests of the Crazy Walls. A man could see no more than twenty feet ahead of his horse's ears; and men could freeze fast in weather like this. It tore through a man's clothing like icy water. It made him numb to the bone.

Several men in the posse had their ears frozen within an hour. Outlaws or no outlaws, a sheriff could not keep men out in such weather. When McBride turned back, he discovered that more than half the possemen had already slipped away, some heading homeward to their own range-lands, and some trying to get back to Wolf Bend.

The loss of the prisoners was a death blow. Gotch McBride could see his and

Judge Bill Shugg's chances of reelection suddenly becoming dark. Overconfidence had done it. For once McBride had been too cocksure of himself; for once he had overplayed his hand.

"And yet I was hoping for an attempted jailbreak," he told himself bitterly. "Praying for it! Planned for it, and it came right when I let myself give up all hopes for it. Hell!"

They were laughing at him when he got back to Wolf Bend, a man half-frozen in his saddle. No one laughed openly, but he could see it in the faces of the crowd of men who came pouring into the jail behind him. He saw Frank Roundtree, the man who was running for office against him. There was a look of smug content on Roundtree's long, perpetually sad face. If something did not happen within a few days Roundtree would be elected sheriff like a mule at a run. Into office with Roundtree would go Old Two-Dot Bob Murdock, to take Judge Bill Shugg's place. People were tired of having a lawyer on the bench. There had been campaign talk of more horse sense and less book-law needed in Wolf Bend.

Outside the window the new scaffold for the hanging was there, now covered with snow, the long ropes still hung noosed and ready. People who had come from a distance to see the hangings were still in town, locked in by the blizzard that seemed to be increasing in its intensity by the minute.

It was like that until late Monday night. People sat huddled around their stoves, with every door and window chinked against the raging storm. Not a word was heard from the outlaws. They had disappeared like puffs of smoke caught in the teeth of a hurricane.

Then, on Monday afternoon, the first mail in three days reached town. And Gotch McBride got three jolts to his pride.

"Three letters from Southwest sheriffs," he told his deputy, "and not a damned one of those crooks are wanted any more. One jackass even says he believes they're trying to go straight—and would if they could find a place to settle down without the law hounding them! Bunk! The law of the Southwest must be going soft!"

"Don't let anybody know about them

letters, Gotch," warned the deputy. "People ain't friendly no more, as it is. Not many of 'em. Shugg's gettin' scared. He was in here a little while ago. Says folks won't let him buy 'em drinks an' won't take his election-time cigars. He's in a bad way."

It seemed only the beginning of things for that ill-fated Monday night. Dude Gunsong left the jail an hour before darkness was settling. He stepped out in the howling wind, the barrel-whirling snow, and the storm swallowed him. McBride hunted him in every saloon and business place, but no one had seen him. When the sheriff returned to the jail he was literally in a stew, and the stew turned into a cold sweat.

"Just elevate," ordered a calm voice from the open corridor of the jail, as he turned to close the door. "I ain't yet shot anybody. Don't want to an' don't think I'll have to. At least I won't do it tonight."

McBride stared. For a moment he did not recognize the speaker. He was clean-shaven now, greasy old mackinaw and floppy hat gone. The figure in the doorway of the corridor had become a neat old man

in shiny black, and was even wearing a white collar. A Colt hung in his right hand, and there was a ghost of a smile on his face.

"If yuh reach for a gun I'll only shoot both elbows off," he warned, face so placid it might have belonged to a pious parson. "That would hurt yuh mighty bad. Splintered bones do. They even make a brave man yell like hell."

"What in hell do you want back here?" snarled the sheriff. "You made your get-away—"

"But I'm an old man an' tired of runnin' from the law," cut in the Katy Flier. "I want yuh to take a little walk with me, Mr. McBride. Slide yore hands gentle-like behind yuh. We'll go out the back way. I found the keys I took that other time, yuh see." The smile was still on his thin face.

McBride had no idea where he was going when they left the jail. A gag was in his mouth, wrists handcuffed behind him. He was marched quietly away in the storm. Keeping clear of the rear walls of the business places on the western side of the street, they came to the lower end

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of town. They swung Southwest then, the muzzle of the six-shooter still pressing against the sheriff's spine, and soon came to the great barn and sheds of a long-deserted ranchhouse with half its roofs caved in. Deep inside the old barn McBride stopped, eyes popping in the light of four smoky lanterns hung in a square on posts. McBride's eyes had narrowed. His body was tense.

The three escaped prisoners were there, leaning against the wall. McBride expected to see them, but he never expected to see the enormous grave dug deep in the earth in the center of the square. In the grave were three big coffins. The pop-eyed, terror-stricken figures of Judge Bill Shugg and Dude Gunsong filled two of them. Both men were gagged. The other coffin was empty and waiting for its victim—Sheriff McBride!



“WE LEFT the boy out of this, Mr. McBride,” intoned the old man, suddenly slipping the gag from the man's mouth. “He's seen enough in the past, an' we all aim for him to see better things from now on.”

“What—what,” gasped the sheriff, cold terror chilling him from head to foot, “are you going to do here? What in hell you . . .”

“Bury yuh alive with the others an' burn the barn down to hide yore grave.” The old man chuckled. “I'm a devil for gettin' some things straight, Mr. McBride. Them two keep sayin' it was yuh who killed old Hank Darby, the shepherd. Not for robbery, they say, but because he knowed too much about another couple of killin's that took place just before the last election, so as the voters wouldn't change hosses in mid-stream, as the old sayin' goes.”

“They—they're liars!” the sheriff's voice was a wail. “They—they were as much in on it as I was! Dude beat him with a gun and shot him! Bill Shugg was down the canyon, holding the horses, that night. Shugg was the one who was afraid Hank might talk. Dude—Dude did the killing!”

“Yuh—yuh lyin' snake!” Tom Satterfield had jerked on a stout cord that pulled the slip knot of the deputy's gag, and the man had spat out the gag. “Yuh beat 'im with the gun! Yuh—yuh was tryin' to make 'im admit that he'd been talkin' to Frank Roundtree an' Two-Dot Bob Murdock! Yuh fired the shots in 'im atter he was dead an' while I was makin' the job look like a robbery! You're just a damn stinkin'—”

“I—I only held the horses down the canyon!” Bill Shugg's gag had come out of his mouth. “And you got me into it, Gotch. Damn you, I might have known where I'd wind up stringing along with you!”

“What won't some men do for votes!” That voice, coming out of the darkness of the old barn, staggered McBride. “You win, Katy, and I thought you would. I'm glad of it.”

Frank Roundtree stepped quietly out of the darkness into the light. Behind him came Bob Murdock. Then, from all sides, men were closing in, more than forty of them, grim-faced, silent, every pair of eyes staring at the sheriff. Eyes that held the fires of hell.

“I knew Jack Morgan, the so-called Katy Flier, years ago, Gotch,” Roundtree was going on. “Badman or no badman, I found his word good. He came to me with a proposition hours before daylight Sunday morning. I listened to him. He had to come in because of the boy. It looks, Gotch, like the ropes at the jail will be used yet. I didn't think you could be such a damn skunk.”

“Damn it,” the sheriff cried, “you can't use the—the Katy Flier's word against mine!”

“We're not!” snarled another man in the crowd. “Hell, Gotch, we've yore word for that killin'. We've got Shugg's an' Gunsong's to back it! Let's go with 'em, boys! We'll have a damn fine necktie party after all.”

“Wait!” The Katy Flier held up his hand. “We're stickin' around these parts to try an' make a new start in life. If Mr. McBride don't mind, I'd like to ask him for an invite to his funeral. I reckon I'll enjoy that.”

TEMPLE HOUSTON —GUN LAWYER!

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

IN A new country, where every man was on his own, personal conduct was naturally more individualistic than in the old, conventional parts of the country, and consequently personalities had more opportunity to develop, even in the more formal professions. Indeed lawyers acquired reputations for traits that would not fit well in the older states.

Temple Houston, son of the Texas hero, was a man who made history for himself—history which will be remembered

a long time in Oklahoma. Tall and dignified, wearing the Prince Albert coat which was the mark of professional men in the early days, an accomplished orator in the somewhat eloquent style of the time, Houston was an outstanding figure. But, in addition, his almost every word and act was dramatic in the extreme. But there was always the reasoning of a brilliant mind behind his dramatics, and in their execution he was afraid of no man living.

There is no better example of the fear-

Frontier lawyer Temple Houston swore to God he'd win freedom for his murder-indicted client—if he had to shoot the whole jury box to hell and gone out of the court room!



A dozen pistol shots thundered almost in the faces of the jurymen.

lessness, the dramatic qualities and the mental alertness of this frontier lawyer than the case of a rather insignificant rancher he once defended on the charge of murdering a well-known bad man, whom the county was a lot better off without.

The defendant claimed he was not guilty, but the story has it that the only witness who could prove his innocence was out of the county and couldn't be returned in time for the trial, which the prosecutor wanted to push through before the witness could come back and wreck his case.

The prosecutor had managed to get a good sprinkling of the bad man's friends on the jury; the rest of the good men and true weren't particularly friendly to the defendant. Houston saw that his only chance, without his witness, was to convince the jury that the rancher simply could not have killed a man so much faster with a gun than he. There, too, was one other possibility which he held as a last resort.

After the prosecutor had presented his witnesses, and Houston had produced none to refute them, the state presented his case to the jury in an impassioned speech. But here Houston was a match for the opposition. Houston, in the vein of his best oratory, addressed the jury:

"Gentlemen of the Jury, you have just heard my client charged with a crime which it was outside the realm of possibility that he commit. He could no more have stood up and faced that experienced gunman than the spark from a lowly firefly could outshine the noonday sun. He could no more have outshot that gunman than the creeping, slimy snail could outrun the fleetest of jackrabbits. Gentlemen, such things are simple and utter impossibilities."



HERE Houston leaned over the rail of the jury box in that pine board courtroom and changed to his most confidential tone.

"You gentlemen," he said, "are ordinary, hard-working people, not high-speed gunmen. You probably are familiar with

firearms, like my client is, but because it is not your business, as it is not my client's business, you have no idea how little chance a man such as yourselves or my client would have in the face of the lightning speed of such a gun artist. You cannot conceive of such speed as the dead man possessed. Why—"

A dozen pistol shots thundered almost in the faces of the jurymen, and a dozen leaden slugs drilled the ceiling.

Temple Houston stood with two smoking derringers in his hands, guns he had drawn from under his Prince Albert coat with lightning speed.

The jury had scattered like jackrabbits. Two men dived out the open window back of the jury box, three more crowded each other through the nearest door. The judge slid out of his chair and hid behind his bench.

The judge crawled out from his hiding place, took his seat and angrily pounded his gavel. The jurors timidly percolated back in.

Houston apologized sincerely to the judge and jury. "But it was necessary to show you all," he pleaded, "just how little chance an ordinary man like my client would have had with that gunman."

Temple finished his presentation, and hoped that he had convinced the jury. But he was disappointed. The jury seemed to have felt that Houston had made fools out of them—so they convicted his client.

The judge seemed to feel a little peeved, and was a little eager to sentence the rancher, possibly as a means of punishing Houston. But Houston had his second card to play. "Your Honor, it is a common and well-known point of procedure that the jury is not to leave the jurisdiction of the court while a trial is in progress. This jury left!"

"You scared them out!"

"Your Honor, the law doesn't mention why jurors leave the courtroom, it merely says that they *must not*. I demand a retrial!"

Temple got his retrial in accordance with the law, and before the retrial came up he had his missing witness, and in the new trial he got an acquittal for his client!

His courage, quick mind and dramatic ability had saved an innocent man.

The Ghost of Satan's Rancho

(Continued from page 92)

"There's another thing, too," he continued sharply. "I'm beginning to think that mebbe we've under estimated this euss, Bronson. You'd pretty nigh figure that a *buscadero* boss would lead his men in a foray like they made tonight. And I know for a fact that the first rider dropped by your ghost was the man in front. It warn't Bronson and none of the rest we clipped met his description. So what does that make you think, amigo?"

"That perhaps this Scar was not one of the attackers," Castro said reluctantly. "But if he was not, señor—"

"He was using them to cover his own actions," Pronto snapped. "Mebbe he's another hombre who has found a secret way into this house. If he has that makes a pair we've got to find."

"I am afraid a search will be hopeless." The young don shook his head. "I know one thing for a certainty. Our casa has many secret passages built within its walls—"

Pronto had started toward the door with determined strides. "We're going to search this place anyway," he said stubbornly, "and we're going to do it with guns in our fists!"

"It will do us no good, señor," Cordoba muttered. "We will find nothing."

A sound like mocking laughter filled the bedchamber suddenly. Pronto whirled back from the door, crouched, a gun leaping into his right hand. Like the twanging of a wire, the weird sound seemed to rise through the floor. Pronto felt it vibrate against the soles of his boots. It seemed to come from the walls too, and the ceiling.

Castro had already started for the tall wardrobe, but Pronto's short legs beat him to it. He yanked open one of the long doors. There was nothing behind them but the blank, plastered wall.

He swung back with a snarl, his eyes snapping. "So somebody has heard every damned word we've said," he told the Spaniard. "If they're still listening, let's tell 'em something more. We're heading right now for that room where you found your dad's boots. That spot ought to be the beginning, or the end of something, and we're going to find out which."

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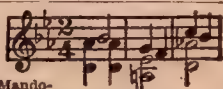
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Cordoba was visibly shaken. "This is all most unreal, señor," he said. "It is hard to believe."

Pronto chuckled mirthlessly. "Gold is funny stuff," he said slowly. "It does damned queer things to folks..."

The panel in the old domed room, through which Corboda had found a way below ground, was still open, and he led the way down ancient stone stairs. Pronto studied them as they descended, and a thread of excitement ran the length of his spine. Sandaled feet had worn those rocks smooth. Why should so many men have used these stairs? According to the Spaniard, the room beneath them was just a square stone chamber. Yet it had taken thousands of steps to wear the granite risers to the slickness they now possessed.

The light of the descending Spaniard's lamp showed an arched entryway below them now as the stairs curved sharply to the right. Pronto pushed past the don.

"I can swallow more lead than you," he said grimly, "if that's what we'll meet."

But when he slipped into the stone-walled room at the foot of the stairs, there was no one to meet them. Side-stepping swiftly to put his back to a solid wall, Pronto stood there for a second while the lamplight drove back the shadows. Then, against the opposite wall, he saw where a small fire had blackened the rocks. Alongside the charred sticks was a very prosaic frying pan.

Castro was in the room by this time. His eyes, too, had seen the pan. "*Por dios*," he exclaimed, "that was not here before!"

Pronto stepped across the floor. The dried remains of fried beans and bacon still remained in the pan. "Your ghost," he drawled ironically, "shore eats hearty grub!"

He had barely voiced the words when a whirring sound filled the underground room.

Pronto whirled. The sound seemed to be coming from the wall alongside the entryway they had used. Old stones grated. As he watched, a section of the wall trembled, moved, and swung ponderously toward them.

It was not a ghost who stood framed in the arch. It was a woman!

CHAPTER FIVE

Gold for Buscaderos

SHE was wearing a black silk shirt that drew tautly across her firm bosom. Tapering to a slender waist, the shirt was tucked into mannish, black broadcloth trousers. Even more mannish was the black, shell-studded gunbelt and big Colt at her hip. Slowly, like a man scarcely crediting his own eyes, Pronto raised his gaze to her face. The woman was young, little more than a girl. There was a spark of deviltry in her deep brown eyes, and in the warm loveliness of her red lips.

"So ghosts don't eat bacon and beans, Mr. James?" She was the first to break the surprised silence, and her voice had the same warm quality as her beauty.

Pronto found himself stuttering, and he was suddenly conscious of stained levis, a dirty, bloody shirt, and the roan stubble that masked his jaw. "M-ma'am," he stammered, "you know me?" He couldn't have said anything more foolish, he realized.

"I know a great deal about *Rancho Mil Diablos*," the girl murmured, and stepped into the room. She wore diminutive, low-heeled boots. Her hair was a dark cloud that framed her oval face. Those imps of merriment at the surprise she had created were still dancing in her eyes.

"I know, for example," she went on, "that you are a brave man and a resourceful one, Mr. James. I doubt if any plan but the one you made would have saved the casa from occupation—even with my help."

Castro Cordoba's eyes were bugging half out of his head, and his mouth was sagging as though he was in all reality staring at a ghost. "You—you, señorita—" It seemed to be all he could say.

Pronto had recovered from his first surprise. "Ma'am," he said, quiet grimness in his tone, "I think you got some explainin' to do."

"I have," she nodded. "And we can talk while we walk. You men have got the chore ahead of carrying Don Luis from the Chamber of Gold."

"Don Luis? *Mi padre*? Oh, señorita!"

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Castro Cordoba's face was suddenly alive. "Do not fool me, señorita. He is really alive?"

"Yes." The girl stepped between the two men and took an arm of each. "Careful on the stairs," she warned. "They're smooth as ice." Her fingers delved inside the breast pocket of her shirt, and came forth with a shining shield of gold which she handed to Pronto. "This ought to answer one question at least," she murmured.

He looked at the badge, and the girl felt his arm contract against hers. "Yes," she said, "I'm a special inspector for the United States Land Office. People like me, working undercover, have done a lot in California to expose land grant frauds and bring the guilty to justice. I want Bronson for fraud and perjury. But I'm getting ahead of myself."

Beyond the lamps they carried was a pit of darkness that was like a well into which the stone stairs seemed to descend endlessly. But Pronto was paying little attention to the way they were traveling. He found that he couldn't keep his eyes off the woman.

"Go on," he said tersely.

"When Bronson first made his claim to Satan's Rim, even before the matter reached the courts, Don Luis appealed to the Registrar of Lands, and I was sent here with him to see if we couldn't locate records dating back to the early conquest of the padres. I was put on the job because I've made quite a study of the secret passages and hiding places that honeycomb most of the old missions and haciendas of California. Nearly all of the systems follow a pattern that a person used to them can discover.

"That is how we succeeded in locating the Lost Mine of the Padres, and the so-called Chamber of Gold. We found no records, however, and it was your scholarly defense"—the girl had turned her head to look at the young don—"that held the judge's favor."

"Por dios!" Pronto watched Castro stiffen, and almost stumble. "Now I remember you. You are the Señorita Lauretta Morgan, to whom my father introduced me at the trial. It is these clothes that made me forget."

The Ghost of Satan's Rancho

"Ghosts don't wear skirts!" the girl smiled, and Pronto colored at the gleam of mischief in her eyes.

But instantly she sobered. "I've watched enough trials," she went on, "to know what the outcome of this one will be. When your father returned here to await the judge's study and decision, I was told by my boss to keep an eye on Bronson. Sometimes a woman can do that easier than a man. But he had slipped out of Sacramento before I received my orders, and I felt certain he was on his way to Satan's Rim.

"I knew that that meant he might try and take by force what he couldn't win legally. I was afraid he might even have made a try for the hacienda. So, by ways Don Luis and I discovered on my first visit, I entered the Padre mine.

"Climbing these stairs from the Chamber of Gold, I found Bronson and two of his men trying to force Don Luis to give them the location of the mine. I fired from the dark of the entryway, and wounded one of Bronson's men. That's the blood you found, Señor Castro. Bronson got away with his wounded man and I helped your father down into the mine, because we felt it would be the safest place for him until help could be brought from Sacramento.

"Together we worked out the note you found when I led you to the ante-room. We thought it might serve the double purpose of sending you out to Sacramento with a story of what happened, and that if you did fall into Bronson's hands he would read the note and believe that Don Luis had died with his secret sealed behind his lips. Since then I've been trying to help you—"

"Help?" Pronto grunted. "Ma'am, you saved our hides earlier tonight! Saved them good!"

"And now," she said, with a touch of grimness in her voice, "we've got to try and save Don Luis. Bronson ripped out his fingernails, and broke one arm. He scorched his feet until he cannot walk. I've done the best I can for him, but he is suffering horribly and needs the attention that only a doctor and a hospital can give him. We've got to get him to Sacramento."

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

PRONTO drew a deep breath. "We stashed a good half of Bronson's *buscaderos*, and with the vaqueros to help we'll shoot our way through the rest if they ain't already running."

"We can start from the base of the promontory," Lauretta Morgan agreed. "It's the way I entered. As you may have guessed by now," she added, as the stairs leveled into a narrow corridor cut through solid rock, "this whole promontory is the Lost Padre mine. I haven't explored all the workings yet. But that can come later."

James nodded. "Right now we got to get Don Luis out of here. The faster we work the better."

The corridor bent ahead of them and, as they rounded it, Pronto saw a glow of

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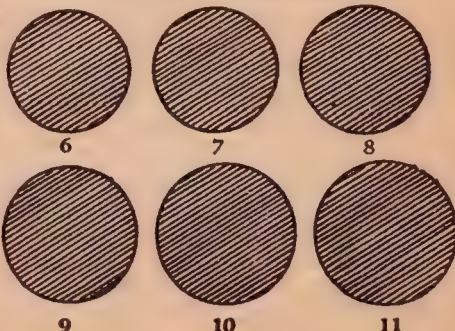
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The Ghost of Satan's Rancho

light at its opposite end. "An' that'll be the Chamber of Gold Bronson's so damned anxious to find?"

"Yes," the girl agreed. "Actually it was used as a treasure room by the padres until the Sierra Indians drove them out."

"And if we live," Castro Cordoba put in, "it will be so used again—for the benefit of us all!"

Pronto paid the don's words little attention. He was finding it hard to think, with Lauretta Morgan so close to him. Other women had never affected him this way, but the time to explore his feelings would have to be postponed. "Pull yourself together, Mister Joe James," he told himself severely. "We ain't out of this yet, and won't be till Bronson's dead or behind bars."

The arched doorway through which the light had come lay ahead. Light that seemed as golden to Pronto suddenly as the contents of the fabulous log bins built along one wall of the room they entered. Gold was in those bins—gold that the padres had left behind! Heaps of it that glowed like shelled corn.

"Enough to break the backs of a hundred mules!" Pronto heard his own awed voice mutter. Then his gaze went to the pitiful shape of Don Luis Cordoba, across the Chamber of Gold, and he knew that all the yellow stuff in California was not worth the torment this treasure house had cost one man.

Don Luis lay on a pile of dirty hides alongside the gold bins. With a cry like a wounded man, young Castro Cordoba had torn his arm from the girl's grip. He rushed toward his father, and Pronto saw one of the don's maimed hands move feebly.

It brought back the feeling of danger to muscles and nerves that had never quite lost their alertness. Corridors spoked off of this one great, beam-ceilinged room. Like gaping black mouths, they seemed to whisper their own warning, and Pronto knew even before the harsh voice spoke from one of them that they were trapped.

"Hold it as you are, all of yuh!" The voice came from one of the black passages in the right wall of the room. "You're covered fore and aft," the voice went on. "Make one move and you're dying, right here."

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Out of the corner of his eye, Pronto saw Lauretta Morgan freeze. Incredulity swept over her face as a man came at a lurching gait out of the black corridor. He held a Winchester saddle-gun at full cock against his hip. Its weaving bore menaced them.

Pronto had never seen Scar Bronson, but there was no mistaking him now. One side of the huge man's face was a horribly puckered red mask. From it glared an eye as pale as milk. He stood there, a grin twisting his wide, loose mouth.

"My pretty one," he taunted the girl, "you've played a high and handsome hand around here. So has your ugly, sawed-off friend, but we'll come to him later. Right now, my hat's off to you for showin' me and the boys—"

Pronto thought he detected a note of hesitation in Bronson's voice when he mentioned the boys.

"—the way in," Bronson went on. "Recollect, I got a look at yuh when you blasted me and my pards out of the upstairs that day we were tryin' to reason with Luis. Didn't take a very smart man to know you hadn't climbed the trail to the casa, on account I was having it watched. That left yuh but one way. In from the other side of the promontory, an' that meant underground. Took a mite of time to find the door you'd used and knock it off its hinges, but I'm still thankin' yuh—"

A nerve twitched in Bronson's face and Pronto knew why the man was boasting. He was stalling for time! Single-handed, he had effected entry to the treasure room, expecting his party that had earlier attacked the hacienda to win it. If they had, the hidden door in the anteroom above would have been battered and blown to bits by now. Bronson didn't know that his *buscaderos* had gotten a belly full of lead and fighting!

If Pronto James was right, they had a chance to live. If he'd guessed wrong, all of them would die here. Then he knew they were slated for death anyway—all except Lauretta Morgan. That much he read in Bronson's eyes. The knowledge turned him chill as gunmetal.

Some hint of his intention must have communicated itself to the *buscadero*.

The Ghost of Satan's Rancho

Pronto saw the muzzle of the man's rifle steady upon him, and so he threw the lamp in his left hand straight at Bronson.

The scarred man tried to dodge and fire at the same time. Pronto felt the slug sear through the denim covering one leg as the base of the lamp caught Bronson in the chest and staggered him. He was throwing his own short body to one side then, and a rocking Colt had found its way into his right hand. He saw lead tear a bloody furrow in the man's face.

The raider dropped his rifle and like a man in a dream lifted one huge hand. The big paw covered the scar; then he was plunging forward. Death took him as he fell.

Powdersmoke, little paler than his own eyes, drifted upward past Pronto's face as he turned to face the room's other occupants. Castro Cordoba sat frozen on his father's pallet. He looked sick.

"I—I am afraid, señor, that I would never make a fighting man," he said huskily. "Each time this killing makes me feel sick."

Lauretta Morgan was smiling, a little tremulously. In the moment the calm efficiency of her manner was gone. "You—you don't believe what people tell you, do you, Joe James?" she said. "He told—"

Pronto interrupted her with a grin that he knew would never be handsome. "Depends on who says what," he remarked, and suddenly, though the words were glued to his tongue, he knew why he'd come to California. It hadn't been for gold. The reason stood not more than arm's length away, and the look in her dark eyes made him suddenly bold.

"If, for instance," he added, "you was to tell me that the Ghost of *Mil Diablos* could kiss an ugly hombre like me I might believe it."

The imp of mischief had found its way back into Lauretta's eyes. "There'll be long days and evenings between here and Sacramento," she said softly. "And if we start now it might be hard to stop. But—but I think I'll take the chance—"

"And that," chuckled the husky voice of Don Luis Cordoba, "is medicine to take the pain from old bones!"

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